



A PEMBERLEY FARM ROMANCE

*dancing  
beneath  
the blue*

A NOVEL

*junipers*

STACEY RAE  
CHARLES

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Dancing Beneath the Blue  
Junipers

A Pemberley Farm Romance

*First published by Gracie & Co. Ink Press 2023*

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*First edition*

*ISBN: 9798852875778*

*This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy*

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*For Chuck*

“Life isn’t about waiting for the storm to pass. It’s about learning to dance in the rain.”

-Vivian Greene

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# Preface

## DANCING BENEATH THE BLUE JUNIPERS

*A Pemberley Farm Romance*

### Spotify Playlist

Break Free| Ariana Grande, Zedd

Highway Don't Care| Tim McGraw, Taylor Swift, Keith Urban

The House That Built Me| Miranda Lambert

It Only Hurts When I'm Breathing| Shania Twain

Summertime Sadness| Lana Del Ray

Problem| Ariana Grande, Iggy Azalea

Clean| Taylor Swift

Thunder| Imagine Dragons

Dangerous Woman| Ariana Grande

Met Him Last Night| Demi Lovato, Ariana Grande

Letters From the Sky| Civil Twilight

Side to Side| Ariana Grande, Nicki Minaj

Everyday| Ariana Grande

She's My Kind of Rain| Tim McGraw

All You Had To Do Was Stay| Taylor Swift



No Tears Left to Cry| Ariana Grande

Favorite Crime| Olivia Rodrigo

Million Reasons| Lady Gaga

Heaven| Julia Michaels

Cruel Summer| Taylor Swift

Big Girls Cry| Sia

Bring on the Rain| Jo Dee Messina, TimMcGraw

Cardigan| Taylor Swift

Adore You| Harry Styles

Capital Letters| Hailee Steinfeld, Bloodpop

Young and Beautiful| Lana Del Ray

Back to December| Taylor Swift

Hold My Hand| Lady Gaga

This Love (Taylor's Version)| Taylor Swift







# Acknowledgement

With boundless gratitude and a touch of awe, I sit here, humbled by the forces that brought this novel to life. First and foremost, I offer my heartfelt appreciation to the divine hand of God, whose unwavering grace propelled me through this enchanting journey.

To my dearest family, you are the radiant stars that guided me through the darkest of nights. Your love, support, and steadfast belief in my dreams breathed life into these pages. Without you, this tale would have remained an untold whisper in the winds of imagination.

A special ode to all the talented musicians on my writing playlist, whose electrifying melodies swirled within my heart, sparking a fire of creativity that blazed across each line. From the beats of their music to the rhythm of my pen, their artistry ignited the soul of this tale.

To my treasured tribe of beta readers and critique partners, the maestros of constructive feedback and keen-eyed editors, I raise my ink-stained hat to you! Your invaluable contributions sculpted this work into its most resplendent form, bringing forth a symphony of emotions on every page.

And to you, dear reader—brave voyager of uncharted worlds—I extend my humble thanks. Your curiosity and

willingness to embark on this literary odyssey warm my heart. As you journey through the realms of my imagination, I hope this tale wraps you in its embrace and transports you to wondrous places.

Together, let us set sail upon the tides of storytelling, as you join me in the magical dance of words and wonder. May this book be a cherished companion, a source of joy, and a tapestry of emotions that lingers in your heart long after the final page.

# Chapter One



**T**HE CAR SUDDENLY sputtered, rolling to a stop.

Sadie Barnhart turned the key over and over but the stupid engine refused to start. With a sigh, Sadie closed her eyes, surrendering. She would have to push this dumpster fire of a car to the side of the road by herself.

It'll be fine, Sadie thought, shifting into neutral. If she could spend hours en pointe during a grueling ballet class, she could surely push this blasted thing a few feet.

Sadie opened the car door and adjusted her Chicago Cubs baseball cap to keep the overbearing sun out of her eyes. She walked to the back of the car and placed both hands on the trunk. Thank goodness she was wearing her comfiest sneakers. She pushed the car forward. It gave with surprising ease and she guided it to the side of the road.

Satisfied the rental wouldn't cause an accident, Sadie pulled the parking brake and, after a few minutes of searching, located the hazard lights.

Sadie slid into the driver's seat and reached for her phone. She'd call her best friend, Ryleigh, to come keep her company while she waited for a tow.

She had everything under control.

A sudden *tap tap tap* on her driver-side window had her pressing a reflexive hand to her racing heart as she turned to see who it was.

He removed dark shades and blinked his green eyes as recognition flashed across his face.

*Shit.*

It was Jameson.

Sadie closed her eyes, weighing her options.

She could ignore him, simply pretend he wasn't standing beside her rental. But since they'd already locked eyes, it'd be hard to feign oblivion. If she could only get her stupid car to work, then she could just drive away, leaving him standing on the side of the road—like he deserved. Unfortunately, that wasn't possible either.

Blowing out a frustrated sigh, Sadie cranked down the window of the ancient Honda Civic with the mechanical nob and fixed a tight smile on her face.

“Sadie Barnhart?” He looked her over with raised eyebrows as if he were trying to decide if his assumption was correct.

“Yes,” she said evenly. “And you are...”

“Don't you remember me?”

*Yes—unfortunately.*

“No, I'm sorry. Have we met?”



He smiled, revealing gleaming white teeth. “Yeah, we have, actually.”

Sadie cleared her throat. “I’m kind of in a hurry...so you’ll have to excuse my forgetfulness.”

“Right,” he said easily. “I’m Jameson McDaniels. We went to school together. I hadn’t heard you were back in Fontana.”

“I’m just visiting. Thanks for stopping but I’m fine. I’ll just call for a tow.” She scrolled through her phone, hoping he would take the hint.

“Mind if I take a look under the hood?” Jameson said, giving her a smile she imagined would convince most women to give in to whatever he desired.

Suppressing her annoyance, Sadie waved a dismissive hand. “That’s really not necessary. I wouldn’t want to trouble you.”

“No trouble at all.” Jameson circled to the front of the car. “Mind popping it for me?”

Sadie screamed internally. Of all the people on earth she could’ve possibly run into...it had to be Jameson?

She couldn’t hate anyone more if she tried.

With his football player build and sun-kissed blonde hair that fell in perfect waves around his face, Jameson had always been Fontana’s golden boy. The way everyone in town fawned over him was enough to make Sadie throw up.

Or throw something at Jameson should the opportunity arise.

She considered doing that now...

Reluctantly, she pulled the lever to open the hood. Sadie reasoned the fastest way to get rid of him was to just let him have his macho moment in the sun. Then he could be on his way, feeling like he'd made some life-shattering contribution toward solving her problem.

He probably didn't know anything about cars anyway.

While he tinkered away under the hood, Sadie perused her phone for a nearby towing company.

"You want to try starting the engine for me?" Jameson yelled from beneath the hood.

*Great idea, genius.*

Fighting the urge to roll her eyes, Sadie yelled back, "That's the problem. It won't turn over."

Unfazed by her subtle hostility, Jameson continued with his examination. "Yeah, I figured. Give it a go anyway."

Sadie turned the key over twice then leaned out the window. "Still not working!"

"I know," said Jameson, emerging from under the hood. "I just wanted to get a better sense of where the problem was coming from." He frowned and went back to examining the fascinating world that existed under the hood—a world Sadie avoided as much as possible.

Her phone buzzed, providing her with an opportune escape from Jameson's presence. It was her best friend calling.

"I was just going to call you," Sadie answered, trying to sound cheerful.

Ryleigh's vibrant voice filled the speaker. "Does that mean you're here already? I didn't expect you for another hour."

"Yeah, you know me," Sadie said, glancing at the car hood to see what Jameson was up to. He was still submerged in the world of car mechanics. "Drove like a bat out of hell."

"So you're at the hospital, then? Do you want me to come meet you?"

Trying to avoid divulging the situation to Ryleigh, Sadie answered, "Actually, my car broke down. Can you come pick me up?" She shared her location and ended the call.

As soon as she set her phone down, Jameson appeared at her door, startling her once again. Her heart pounding, she attempted to regain her composure. "I didn't see you there," Sadie confessed.

"Sorry to sneak up on you," Jameson said with a wink.

Sadie refused to let him get to her. "No problem—long drive, you know?"

With a hand casually resting on the hood of her rental car, Jameson leaned down and peered at Sadie. "So it looks like both the fuel injector nozzles are clogged. Have you ever had them cleaned out?"

Sadie didn't like his accusing tone but chose to ignore it. "It's a rental. Thanks for taking a look and everything but you can go. I have a friend coming to pick me up."

Undeterred by her dismissal, Jameson slid his hands into the pockets of the dark jeans he wore, as if to emphasize his effortless coolness. "Sure, Sadie. I texted a friend who owns a repair shop in town. He should be here soon to retrieve the car. He'd fix it right up for next to nothing, but we might as well get the rental company to pay since they gave you such a shoddy deal."

He smiled down at her like they were two old friends, just catching up.

Sadie didn't like it one bit.

She couldn't think of anything to say as she stared up at his smiling face.

"Well...thank you."

"My pleasure," he said simply.

"I'll let you get on your way, then," Sadie said, adopting a brisk tone. She desperately hoped he would leave and that she wouldn't run into him again while she was home.

Jameson chuckled as he readjusted his sunglasses and gave her one last dazzling smile. "Okay. See you around, Sadie."

Then he was gone, sauntering back toward his sleek, black BMW without so much as a backward glance.

\* \* \*

Fontana was located in the heart of Kansas and only an hour's drive from Kansas City. It felt like ages since Sadie had been back even though she'd spent Christmas at Pemberley two years ago. Her grandparents' farm had been in her family for five generations. And her great-great-grandmother had christened it Pemberley in honor of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Sadie closed her eyes, savoring the intoxicating scent of farm air. The comforting embrace of Pemberley enveloped her as she stepped out of the car, bidding farewell to Ryleigh as her friend drove away in her vibrant red Fiat.

Thankfully, Ryleigh's timely arrival spared Sadie the embarrassment of explaining her encounter with Jameson.

Not that she was trying to hide anything from her best friend.

But Ryleigh would make a big thing out of it and it wasn't. It was just...a thing that happened. Lots of strange things happened all the time. It didn't mean you had to sit around stewing about it.

Not that she was stewing...she was just—processing.

Jameson had been telling the truth about his mechanic friend. The tow truck arrived shortly after Ryleigh and the driver assured her they would handle everything.

Sadie, once again, had found herself at a loss for words. And knowing Jameson had arranged it made the whole thing perplexing.

She shoved it to the back of her mind as she grabbed the handle of her large green suitcase on wheels—a college graduation present from her grandparents—and hurried up the front steps. She wasn't sure if Grandma Mae would be at the house or the hospital. She pulled open the unlocked screen door.

“Grandma Mae? Are you here?”

“Sadie, that you?”

It sounded like she was in the kitchen.

Sadie walked into her grandmother's kitchen, decorated in cozy blue and cream tones that echoed the warmth and cheer Grandma Mae bestowed on anyone lucky enough to be near her. Her grandmother sat at the cherry-wood kitchen table with a cup of coffee, surrounded by stacks of papers and her adding machine.

“Sadie,” Grandma Mae said, clear blue eyes brimming as she rose from her chair. She walked to Sadie, throwing her arms around her. “It's so good to have my best girl home.”

Sadie buried her head in her grandmother's shoulder, breathing in her familiar scent of lavender perfume. “I missed you,” she said softly. “Sorry it took me so long to come back.”

Her grandmother pulled away, placing wrinkled, soft hands on Sadie's cheeks. “No apology necessary. You're here now. That's what's important.”

She patted Sadie's cheek like she used to when Sadie was a child. Then she walked to the cupboard by the sink and

selected a sunny yellow mug. Grandma Mae poured coffee from the pot on the counter and passed it to her.

Sadie followed her grandmother to the table, sliding into the empty chair next to hers. She savored the warmth of the cup in her hands before taking a sip. The jolt of strong, hot caffeine was a blessing after her terrible morning.

“How’s Grandpa doing?” Sadie asked, taking another sip.

She could still hear the fear in her grandmother’s voice from when she’d called a few days ago. Grandpa Cliff had a heart attack while he was working on the farm. Luckily, one of the farmhands had found him in time. And after a seven-hour, triple bypass surgery, he’d pulled through.

But Grandpa Cliff would need to stay in the hospital for a while. Then, there’d be physical therapy to get him back on his feet.

A cloud passed over her grandmother’s features. “You know your grandfather. He insists he’s healthy as a horse and everyone’s overreacting. If he had his way, he’d be back to working on the farm tomorrow.”

“But you told him that won’t be possible for a while, right?”

Grandma Mae smiled, lifting her coffee cup. “You can tell that man something until you’re blue in the face. Don’t mean he’ll change his tune.” She took a drink and looked at Sadie. “But he knows you’re coming home today. I’m sure that makes him feel better about things.”

Sadie hoped that was true.

There was nothing she wanted more than for her grandfather to get back on his feet as soon as possible. “That’s why I’m here. Put me to work. I’ll do whatever needs to be done while Grandpa Cliff recovers. Mr. Sloan can show me what to do. I’ll prove to him that the farm is in good hands and he can focus on doing whatever the doctor tells him.”

“Unfortunately, no one can tell your grandfather anything. He makes up his own mind about what’s best.” Grandma Mae glanced down at the papers in front of her. “How’s that ankle doing?”

She’d taken a bad turn at a dance rehearsal for a local Chicago theater production last month. And her finances were still reeling from the lost income. “It’s fine. Just a sprain. I completed physical therapy and the doc says it’ll be at least another month before I can dance on it.”

Grandma Mae wagged a finger at Sadie. “Promise me you’ll let me know if the chores become too much to handle.”

“Cross my heart,” said Sadie, swiping her index finger across her chest. “Stop worrying. I promise I’m fine.”

She removed her reading glasses and left them hanging around her neck as she looked at Sadie. Bright blue eyes—the same color as Sadie’s—registered concern.

“What are you not telling me?” Sadie set her cup down and reached for Grandma Mae’s hand.



She'd always loved her grandmother's hands—soft to the touch, fingernails trimmed short with clear polish, strong and capable. In many ways, her hands mirrored who her grandmother was on the inside.

Grandma Mae sighed. “Sadie...we're in danger of losing Pemberley.”

Sadie's mouth fell open. Stunned didn't even begin to cover what she was feeling. How could she not have known things had gotten this bad?

“How did this happen?”

“We had a rough time of it, a year or so back. A few crops went bad, some of our livestock got sick...we had to turn away some of our regulars. Just couldn't fill their orders. They went with other farms to meet their needs—some of the bigger, corporate-owned outfits.” Her grandmother's mouth settled into a hard line.

She knew how much Grandma Mae hated corporate meddling. Her grandmother had been hammering her beliefs into Sadie's head ever since she was a girl.

“Surely, those customers would come back now that things are better.” Sadie took another sip of coffee as she stared at her grandmother. “People want quality products at decent prices and that's what you and Grandpa Cliff have always provided. Sooner or later, they'll realize what they had in you.”

Her grandmother smiled thinly. Not exactly reassuring. “But things haven't gotten better. We've needed more money

for years. Equipment in need of replacement. Had to let more than a few farmhands go 'cause we couldn't afford to pay them. And now, with your grandfather sick—well, the truth is we've fallen behind on our payments to the bank.”

“But you and Grandpa own this farm—it's been in our family for ages. Why would you owe the bank money?”

Grandma Mae folded her hands together on the table in front of her as she stared down at them. Sadie did not take that as a reassuring sign. “We put the farm up as collateral on a loan we took out some years back.”

“What was the loan for?” Sadie couldn't fight the panic building inside her.

“For you and your brother's college education,” Grandma Mae said.

Sadie sat back in her chair, blinking, unable to find the words she needed. “Why would you keep this from us? We never would've accepted the money if we'd known.” She tried to keep her tone even but her emotions betrayed her.

The fear of losing her childhood home. The betrayal of her grandparents' secrecy. The fierce sense of love and loyalty. That they would sacrifice this farm—their livelihood, their legacy—for her and Elijah. Her eyes filled. She blinked them back so as not to upset her grandmother further.

“It means the world that you and Grandpa put yourself through this for me and Elijah,” Sadie said. “But I can't let you lose the farm because of it.”

Grandma Mae shook her head. “Don’t you go blaming yourself for something we chose to do. And I’d do no different even if I knew we’d end up right where we are. You and Elijah are everything to your grandfather and me. This,” she said, waving her hands around her, “is just a building and when it comes down to it—this is all replaceable.”

Sadie went to her grandmother, throwing her arms around her neck. “I love you so much, do you know that?”

“I love you more,” Grandma Mae said, patting Sadie’s arms. “You’re all I have left of your father. For his sake, we have to do everything we can to help you get a leg up in this world.”

Thinking of her father always brought with it a mix of emotions for Sadie. “Okay.” She stood, putting her hands on her hips as she smiled at her grandmother. “Enough of the gloom and doom. We’re going to figure out a way to save the farm.”

“Sadie,” Grandma Mae held a hand up in protest. “This is not your problem. I won’t have you making yourself sick over it. You’re here to spend time with Grandpa. And to give your ankle a chance to heal so you can get back to dancing.”

Sadie nodded. But she wasn’t giving up that easily. One way or another, she was saving Pemberley.

All she needed was a plan.

## Chapter Two



**S**ADIE POURED A second cup of coffee and wandered out to the porch.

It was the first week of May and the lovely spring weather had swiftly transformed into a sultry and humid affair. Her fiery red hair, styled in a loose braid, cascaded over her shoulder as she settled onto the inviting porch swing.

After spending the night at the hospital with Grandpa Cliff, her grandmother finally succumbed to her exhaustion. The solitude was a welcomed respite, allowing Sadie to gather her thoughts. With the mug cradled in her lap, she idly swung her feet back and forth, pondering the monumental question that loomed before her—how to save Pemberley.

She'd been a dance major at Illinois State. That didn't exactly scream capable of running a farm. Sadie sighed, leaning back to rest her head against the cushion.

This was not how she'd planned on spending her time at home.

She'd envisioned some light farm chores, errands for her grandmother, and spending the majority of her time at the hospital with Grandpa Cliff.

Should she reach out to Elijah?

Surely, he deserved to know about the dire situation they faced.

But Sadie didn't want to bother him. Elijah was finishing up his third year of medical school at Wash U and he was swamped with preparing for his exams. And with finals looming, it was *not* the right time.

Besides, she was the older sibling.

So it was her responsibility—not his.

Sadie smiled wistfully, realizing her grandparents must've felt the same way about burdening her with their troubles. They were cut from the same cloth, and there was no use pretending otherwise.

No, she'd call Elijah and let him know—eventually. When she had things under control.

Because she could do this. Because she *had* to do this.

What other choice did she have?

She couldn't just go back to Chicago and pretend none of this was happening.

But if she stayed to help, Natalia would need to find someone else to share their studio apartment. Sadie couldn't blame her. She was a struggling dancer like Sadie and it was always tough making rent on a dancer's pitiful earnings in a city like Chicago.

There were also her dance classes to consider. And summer auditions for the upcoming national tours. Sadie needed to prepare. She'd been working toward building her dance resume so she could land a big part in a great Broadway production.

It was her dream.

Could she throw away five years of awful auditions and grueling ballet classes? Five years of struggling to get by on Ramen noodles and canned soup. Five years of aching muscles requiring an ice bath just to be able to walk.

No. It was simply out of the question. Her grandparents would never want her to quit dancing to stay at Pemberley permanently.

Sadie would just have to figure something out in a month. Something that wouldn't be too much for her grandparents to manage.

Piece of cake.

She took a deep breath, exhaling slowly as she brought her coffee cup to her lips.

Her phone buzzed from beside her on the porch swing. Carlotta was FaceTiming her. She'd been living in Los Angeles since high school—working as a sometimes singer and part-time actress. They stayed in constant contact, FaceTiming and texting, but it hardly made up for not seeing her in person.

Relaxing her face into a smile, she answered the call.

“Hey, Car,” Sadie said.

“Hey? *Hey?* That’s all you have to say to me?” Carlotta playfully scolded, her dark, luscious hair waterfalling over her bare shoulders. “Why did I have to hear from Ryleigh that your car broke down?”

Thick as thieves—that was the way Grandpa Cliff had always described her, Carlotta, and Ryleigh. They’d been best friends ever since Carlotta moved to Fontana the summer before freshman year.

“Oh—well, I was going to call. I just got to Pemberley. I haven’t even unpacked yet.” Carlotta was always a drama queen, even from a few thousand miles away.

“Well, if you haven’t even unpacked...I guess you’re forgiven.” Carlotta rubbed her red lips together, her huge, dark eyes twinkling with amusement. “How’s my favorite grandpa doing?”

Sadie updated her on Grandpa Cliff’s heart surgery and recovery. Having no living grandparents, Carlotta had always cherished Sadie’s.

“Okay, now let’s talk about you,” Carlotta said, narrowing her eyes as she shifted the focus of their conversation.

“Don’t give me that look,” Sadie said. “What is there to talk about?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Carlotta said, scanning her perfectly-manicured, red fingernails. “We could talk about your run-in with Jameson McDaniels.”

“What—how did you—?”

“How did I find out? Please. Sadie, give me a little credit. Besides, it’s hard to escape prying eyes when it comes to Jameson. You do remember Fontana’s smaller than a breadbox, don’t you? Nothing—and I do mean nothing—escapes the neighborhood watch.”

“That still doesn’t answer my question. Who told you Jameson helped me?”

Carlotta grinned like a damn fool, barely able to conceal her obvious delight. “Dottie Andrews works in the repair shop where they brought your car. She overheard the owner talking to Jameson on the phone and saw your name on the paperwork when the car arrived. Dottie texted my mom and my mom texted me.”

“Are they planning to run it in the local paper tomorrow as the front-page story?” Sadie asked, rubbing her forehead. “Why don’t you people get a life?”

“Can’t!” Carlotta sang out. “It’s too much fun nosing around in yours.”

“It was just one of those things. We don’t need to make a thing out of it,” Sadie said.

“Oh, I think we do,” Carlotta said. “In fact, let’s get Ryleigh on the phone so we can all make a huge thing out of it.”

A moment later, Ryleigh’s face graced the screen. Her blond curls bounced around her pretty face as her deep green



eyes registered concern. Ryleigh, the kindergarten teacher with a heart of gold, had always been the epitome of empathy.

“Sadie, I’m sorry!” Ryleigh cried. “I didn’t know you wanted to keep it a secret. You look really upset. What can we do to help?”

“Thanks, Ry, at least I can count on you to show a little compassion.” Sadie gave Carlotta a pointed look. “Unlike some people I know.”

Carlotta waved a dismissive hand. “I have compassion. What I need are details.” She wiggled well-groomed eyebrows, her brown eyes glinting mischievously. “Spill.”

“There’s nothing to spill. I swear you two get so worked up over nothing.”

“Ry, does she seem a little defensive to you or is it just me?”

“Leave her alone,” Ryleigh said, shaking her head. “If she doesn’t want to talk about it then we shouldn’t push her.”

Sadie lifted both hands in frustration. “There’s nothing to talk about. My car broke down. He showed up, gave it the once over so he could feel macho, and made a call. Honestly, it was the biggest nothing that ever was nothing.”

Carlotta propped up her chin on both hands, staring into the screen as if she were trying to read Sadie’s thoughts. “I do believe no one in the history of the world has used nothing as much as you have in the last five minutes.”

“Oh my God! I hope I never see Jameson McDaniels again for as long as I live!” Sadie shouted, unable to keep her emotions in check a second longer.

Well, at least she’d shut them up.

“I’m sorry. It’s been—a day. And if it’s okay with you, I’d prefer we stop talking about...my rental car.”

Ryleigh gave her a sympathetic smile. “We can definitely do that. I can be over to the farm in less than five minutes if you need me.”

“I’m sorry, Sade,” Carlotta said. “Consider the subject dropped.”

“Good. Because I do have a problem. And I’m going to need you both to help me figure out a solution.”

“We’re here for you,” Ryleigh reassured, her voice filled with warmth.

“Whatever you need,” Carlotta agreed, her excitement palpable.

“That’s excellent news. Because I need you to help me save Pemberley.”

\* \* \*

Sadie pushed open the swinging door at Porters. It was owned by Ryleigh’s parents and one of the few restaurants in town.

Ryleigh was bustling about behind the counter. A few customers were seated in the dining area while two teenagers sat at the counter, perusing menus.

Sadie waved and her friend's pretty face lit up. "Hi! Give me a few more minutes then I'll come join you."

"Take your time," Sadie called.

As Sadie waited, she retrieved her trusty notebook from her bag—a forgotten companion she'd rediscovered while rummaging through the desk in her childhood bedroom. Opening it to a fresh page, she fished out a pen and delved into the ideas she had jotted down the previous night. The restlessness of her mind, fueled by yesterday's morning mishap and a late afternoon hospital visit, had sparked a burst of inspiration.

With golden curls dancing around rosy cheeks, Ryleigh joined Sadie, sliding into the seat opposite her. "Sorry that took longer than expected," Ryleigh apologized, her voice tinged with exhaustion. "Annie called in sick this morning, and my parents asked me to fill in. We were really busy for a while."

Surveying the near-empty diner, Sadie chuckled. "Yeah, I can see what you mean."

Ryleigh laughed. "I swear it was busier before you came in. I know our humble little diner could never hope to live up to the excitement of a big city restaurant."

Sadie nodded. "As long as you know that."

"You're impossible," Ryleigh said. "But I love you anyway."

“In all seriousness, there’s no place in Chicago that can hold a candle to your chocolate chip cookies.”

“Thank you,” Ryleigh said, dipping her head. “I take compliments and monetary donations. Not necessarily in that order.”

Ryleigh loved teaching Kindergarten but she’d always had a passion for baking. Growing up in her parents’ restaurant had allowed her the freedom to experiment with recipes and delight their customers.

Sadie slid her notebook over to Ryleigh. “I jotted down a few ideas last night and I wanted to get your opinion.”

Ryleigh’s emerald eyes widened in surprise as she studied the extensive list. “A few? This must have taken you quite a while.”

“Not really. Once I got going it was hard to stop.” Sadie took that as a good sign. It had been more fun than she’d anticipated.

“I know exactly what you mean.” Ryleigh’s face lit up with understanding. “I was working on a new cake recipe last night and I swear three hours slipped away and I didn’t even notice.”

Sadie gently patted her hand. “That I can believe. You haven’t changed a bit since high school.”

“Well, we are who we are, I suppose.” Ryleigh slid the notebook toward Sadie.

The door to the restaurant jingled as it opened. But Sadie paid it no mind. She studied her list, attempting to organize her jumbled thoughts so she could best present them to Ryleigh.

“Well, I like that. A person leaves town and her two best friends just carry on without her as if nothing has changed.”

Sadie whirled around to see Carlotta standing behind her. Her presence electrified the small dining room as she stood there, hands on her hips, a radiant smile breaking across her face like the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*.

“What are you doing here?” Sadie cried, throwing her arms around her friend. Her surprise melted into a warm embrace as they clung to each other, giggling like children.

“My turn,” Ryleigh said, throwing her arms around Carlotta.

At that moment, surrounded by her two closest friends, Sadie felt an invincible force. And somehow, the weight of her current predicament seemed lighter.

Excitement buzzed in the air as Carlotta grabbed an empty chair and slid it over to join them.

Sadie shook her head at Carlotta. “I still can’t believe you’re here. Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

Carlotta nonchalantly fluffed her long, dark hair. “Because I wanted to surprise you.”

Ryleigh looked sheepishly at Sadie. “I knew she was coming. But she swore me to secrecy.”

“When I found out about Grandpa Cliff and you coming home—well, it was an easy decision,” Carlotta said. “I don’t have any auditions for a few weeks and I just wrapped my gig at the Roxy so...I’m a free agent at the moment.”

“LA’s loss is our gain,” Sadie said. “I’m really glad you’re both here.” Looking from Ryleigh to Carlotta, she couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed with gratitude. “Because I don’t think I’d get through this without you guys.”

Ryleigh reached across the table and grabbed Sadie’s hand. “Luckily, you never have to get through anything without us.”

“I believe it’s written somewhere in the best friend handbook that you never have to go through the bad times alone,” said Carlotta.

Sadie smiled. “I keep meaning to dust that old thing off and give it a read.”

“Sadie has a whole list of ideas for Pemberley,” Ryleigh said.

“Looks like I’m just in time for the big presentation. Proceed,” Carlotta said, crossing her long legs. Wedged sandals with wrap-around straps adorned her feet, complementing the short, red sundress she wore.

Taking a deep breath, Sadie focused on her vision, knowing that her friends were the key to making it a reality.

“Okay,” Sadie began, “so, like I told you on the phone, Pemberley is struggling financially. The machinery needs replacing and we’ve lost a lot of customers over the past year.

So,” she paused, taking a deep breath, “my idea is for us to turn Pemberley into a captivating tourist destination.”

“A tourist destination?” Carlotta echoed, her sculpted eyebrows arching in intrigue.

“Yes,” Sadie continued. “The farm is self-sufficient right now. Most of the revenue comes from crop and livestock sales to restaurants in neighboring towns around Fontana. It’s always been a small-scale operation and that used to work just fine but now—well, it won’t be enough to get the farm out of debt.” She paused, scanning their faces. “To save Pemberley—we need to think bigger.”

“And that’s what your list of ideas is about?” Ryleigh asked. “All the ways you can upgrade Pemberley?”

“Exactly,” Sadie said with a smile. “But I’ll need your help to pull it off.”

“What did you have in mind?” Carlotta asked, her eyes shining with determination.

“Well, the first thing I was thinking about was the farmer’s market in Paola. It’s local—a great way to build our name in the neighboring towns—and good publicity for Pemberley. We could sell produce and some of Grandma Mae’s quilts and homemade jams. I was also thinking that Ryleigh,” she nodded in her friend’s direction, “could make some of her town-famous baked goods to sell. Pemberley would pay for all the ingredients and give you compensation for your time.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary. I’d do it for free,” Ryleigh said. “For the opportunity to display my culinary creations. Besides, saving Pemberley is going to take every penny we can earn.”

“Well—okay. But once we have the farm’s finances stabilized, my grandparents would insist on paying you. It’s the right thing to do.”

“The farmer’s market sounds like a great start,” said Carlotta. “What else do you have on your list?”

“The next part would be considerably more challenging. But I believe it’s the best way to get the farm out of debt.” Sadie glanced down at her list, making sure she had her ideas fresh in her mind. “I think we should turn Pemberley into a bed-and-breakfast.”

Carlotta slowly smiled, nodding her head. “It really is well-suited for it. I’ve always thought Pemberley was one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever visited.”

“I agree,” said Ryleigh, grinning. “That’s a fantastic idea.”

“It would mean a lot of work—and renovations. We could convert the barn into a full-service dining area with an outdoor patio—a pool, hot tub, fire pit, soft lights, maybe an outdoor bar, and coffee service. With all the walking trails on the farm, we could also sell day passes for groups and individuals.”

“And tours of the farm,” Carlotta added. “I know Grandpa Cliff always lets the elementary school take field trips there for free. We could open that up to neighboring towns and charge a



fee for field trips and tours. I assume you plan to keep the farm functional.”

“Yes, I think that’s part of its appeal. We could sell it as an up-close and personal look at authentic, daily life on a farm.”

Ryleigh nodded. “The farm already has that beautiful pond on the edge of the property next to the row of blue juniper trees. It would be great for fishing and maybe some water sports?”

“I agree,” Sadie said. “There’s so much that Pemberley has to offer. We just need to find a way to capitalize on the unique experience of it.”

“So what do you need from us?” Carlotta asked, leaning forward to rest her elbows on the table.

She turned towards Ryleigh. “I was hoping you would be in charge of the baking for the farmer’s market and I was also thinking maybe you could oversee the dining area. I’m sure you know from working here how to get the restaurant up and running.”

Ryleigh nodded, emerald eyes sparkling with delight. “I love it. With school ending in a few weeks, I would have the next few months available to oversee preparations. My parents could help me figure out what’s needed. I’m so excited! I think it’ll be a blast!”

“And what about me?” Carlotta asked.

“I thought you would be the perfect person to oversee event planning and activities. Field trips, daily tours, but also

fun stuff for our guests that book weekend stays. Who better than you to come up with an exciting itinerary of day and night events for our guests?”

Sadie had immediately thought of Carlotta and her flair for the dramatic when she decided Pemberley should offer its guests a full complement of day and evening activities as part of their vacation experience.

“That sounds—perfect,” Carlotta’s face broke into a sunny smile. “We also need to create a website—a full-on social media campaign. And wouldn’t Pemberley be a great spot for hosting special events like bridal showers, girls’ night out, and even weddings? The outdoor patio area could easily be converted into a dance floor with a full band or DJ,” she said with excitement. “I already have a bunch of ideas percolating.”

“I knew you’d be the perfect person,” Sadie said. “And I’ll oversee the barn renovations, the finances, and, of course, I was thinking we could convert the main house into our bed-and-breakfast. We could also renovate the outdoor shed on the property into a little apartment for my grandparents if they want their own living space. I’ll talk to Grandma Mae and see what she prefers.”

“I’m so proud of you, Sadie,” Ryleigh said, squeezing her hand. “It’s an excellent idea.”

“You really think it could work?” Sadie asked, staring at her friends with trepidation.

Carlotta laid her hand on top of Ryleigh’s and Sadie’s, a huge grin spreading across her face. “I believe you have a real

talent for this, Sadie Barnhart. And with the two of us behind you, how could it possibly fail?”

Sadie nodded, feeling jubilant.

This was her chance to repay her grandparents for giving her and Elijah a loving home all those years ago when they’d had nowhere else to go.

Now it was her turn to save them.

Failure was not an option.

Pemberley Farm would rise from the ashes of near ruin—and soar to great success. At least, that was her plan.

Now all she had to do was put it into action.

\* \* \*

The midday sun streamed through the open curtains in the hospital room, casting its spotlight on Grandpa Cliff tucked neatly into a raised bed. He was yelling at the TV and Sadie couldn’t help but smile as she took in the sight of his ruddy cheeks and bright blue eyes, still lit with the same fire they’d always held.

“Goddammit! My late mother could throw better than that! Come on, Boyer! Strike him out!”

“I’m not sure yelling at the Royals is on the approved list of physical activities for heart-attack patients,” she said with a wry smile, shaking her head.

Grandpa Cliff grinned at her. “You wouldn’t rat me out to the nurse, now would you, Sadie girl?”

“I think I’d be more worried about Grandma Mae if I were you.” She placed the vase of vibrant spring flowers she’d purchased on a nearby table before settling into the chair beside the bed.

“For heaven sake, don’t tell your grandmother.” He held up an untouched sugar-free chocolate pudding from his half-eaten lunch tray. “Have you eaten yet?”

“I had a late breakfast at Porters with the girls so I’m all set.”

Besides, the sanitized air reeked of ammonia and put knots in her stomach. Ever since her parents’ accident, hospitals had a way of setting her on edge. She doubted she’d be able to eat let alone yell at a baseball game if she were in her grandfather’s position.

He returned the pudding to his lunch tray and muted the baseball game before turning to Sadie with a smile. “You just missed your grandmother. She ducked out to head to the market but she’ll be back later.”

Sadie nodded. “Yeah, she told me this morning.” She rubbed her lips together unsure how to broach the subject of the farm’s financial trouble without upsetting her grandfather. She needed him to know that she could handle things. That he could count on her like she’d counted on him all these years. “So—um—Grandma told me about the troubles you’ve been having with the farm.”

Her grandfather sighed. “Now, Sadie that’s not for you to worry about.”

“And she told me why the farm is having trouble.”

“It’s just been a bad couple of years,” said Grandpa Cliff. “We’ll bounce back. We always do.”

Her grandfather had always been a proud man. And stubborn to boot. Sadie supposed it was where she got it from.

“I know you will. But I wanted to tell you about an idea I had to help Pemberley and expand the business. I’m really excited about it.” She quickly filled him in on everything she’d discussed with Ryleigh and Carlotta at breakfast. He was quiet as he listened and Sadie couldn’t quite gauge how he was feeling. “So what do you think?”

At first, he said nothing. Then, a huge smile broke out across her grandfather’s face and Sadie’s fears subsided.

“I think that my granddaughter is one of the most talented, level-headed, determined people in this world and I couldn’t be any prouder than I am in this moment.”

Overcome with emotion, Sadie blinked back tears. “Thank you, Grandpa. That means everything to me. So you like my idea?”

“Like it?” He let out a hearty laugh. “I’m just sitting here wondering why I never thought of it myself. It’ll be a good deal of work. But I believe in you, Sadie girl. And if you want to do this then you’ve got my vote.”

She jumped out of her chair and threw her arms around her grandfather’s neck, savoring the familiar scent of his spiced aftershave.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said. “You have a lot of hard work ahead of you.”

Pulling away, she looked up at him with a steadfast smile. “I promise I’m up to the challenge.”

“Course you are. You’re a Barnhart, ain’t ya? Finest stock there is.” Grandpa Cliff used his remote to turn up the volume on the TV. “Now help me root for the Royals. Good Lord knows they need all the help they can get.”

Laughing, she settled back into her chair, happy to hear the familiar sounds of baseball fill the room as her grandfather resumed his ritual of yelling at the players.

With her grandparents’ support and the unwavering dedication of her two best friends, Sadie knew she could do this.

She could save Pemberley Farm.

The road ahead might be challenging, but Sadie was determined to make her vision into a reality.

# Chapter Three



**J**AMESON MCDANIELS stepped out of his sleek black BMW, his sunglasses perched on his head.

He used the key fob to lock his black BMW—a present from his father last year to commemorate his hard work as the top McDaniel Properties developer in the area. A nice ride but, honestly, he found it a little pretentious for driving through the quaint streets of Fontana.

Jameson had never been comfortable with the attention that came with being the son of James McDaniels II—the Midwest’s renowned real estate tycoon. Being admired for something he had no control over just didn’t sit right with him.

That was the main reason he’d decided to go to Kansas State University on a football scholarship. He’d wanted nothing more than to create a name for himself based on his own merits.

And his plan had worked well.

He’d double-majored in business and architecture at his father’s insistence. Just in case the football thing didn’t pan out. For the first time in his life, he’d been around people who

knew and liked Jameson for himself. He'd worked hard and done well—in his classes and on the football field.

He'd even garnered the attention of some NFL scouts.

But when he took a hard hit to his back during junior year homecoming game, everything changed.

The injury had required surgery, followed by months of therapy, and put an end to his football days. At the time, it'd been a tough blow but he'd pulled himself together and focused on his studies. He'd earned his master's and graduated summa cum laude.

Turned out, he was much brighter than he'd given himself credit for in high school.

When he applied himself, there wasn't anything he couldn't accomplish. His no-excuses work ethic had brought him through the tough times in college and helped him find success on his own merits, even earning his father's respect.

As Jameson walked down Main Street in Fontana, he caught the eye of more than a few women, earning warm smiles and casual greetings. He was polite, smiling and waving in return. His mother, Penelope McDaniels, had raised him to be the perfect gentleman and he liked to think he made her proud.

Jameson walked toward the only bank in town to make a deposit and sign some papers for his father. He scrolled through his phone, reading a few texts that had come in while he'd been driving.



Suddenly, he collided with something—or rather, someone—soft and undeniably female. Papers fluttered to the ground as they both recoiled from the impact.

“Are you freakin’ kidding me?”

His unintended victim crouched down on the sidewalk, gathering the scattered documents that had spilled out of her carrying case, her face averted from his gaze.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am,” Jameson said, dropping beside her on the sidewalk and retrieving papers before they could fly away.

He tried to get a look at the woman so he could figure out who she was. Jameson knew almost everyone in Fontana. Whoever she was, his mystery woman was drop-dead gorgeous with long, shapely legs and a graceful figure which made him all the more curious to uncover her identity.

She finally turned toward him. Intriguing blue eyes flashed with anger as she spoke, her tone dripping with frustration. “I don’t need your help. Can you please just leave me alone?”

Her words caught Jameson off guard, leaving him momentarily speechless.

Sadie Barnhart.

The realization struck him like a bolt of lightning. Her fiery red hair was elegantly twisted atop her head and she exuded timeless grace in a simple blue dress and heels.

Jameson found himself completely mesmerized.

And all he could do was stare at her, blinking.

When he didn't answer or make any attempt to leave, Jameson swore he saw those captivating eyes alight with fire. "Fine," she said, clenching her teeth. "I'll go."

Jameson shook his head, clearing the fog. "Sadie, I'm sorry. I didn't see you. Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

Sadie stood and he copied her movement, still holding some of her papers. She cocked her head to the side and looked at Jameson as if she were trying to figure something out.

With a shake of her head, she said, "Look, I appreciate your help the other day with the car but I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

Jameson grinned, which seemed to make her even angrier, though he wasn't sure what he'd done to make her so mad.

She was so damn cute, standing there, glaring at him, even though she was at least a whole head shorter. God, he admired that about her—the way she didn't just fawn all over him because of his father. She stood her ground and he found that incredibly attractive.

"Hello?" Sadie said. "I am addressing you, your high and mightiness. Can I please have my things back?" She held out her hand expectantly.

Jameson snapped out of his reverie, realizing he still held some of Sadie's papers. Handing them back to her, he couldn't

help but notice the intricate drawing on the top page—a sketch of a building. “This is really good. Did you draw it?”

With a weary gaze, Sadie replied, “Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, I did.” She placed the recovered pages inside her brown leather bag.

“I never knew you were an artist,” Jameson said, folding his arms across his chest as he stared down at her.

She smoothed her hair back with one hand as she eyed him. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me. Now if you don’t mind, I have an important meeting that I can’t be late for.”

With that, Sadie walked past him and into the bank, never giving him so much as a second glance.

Well, maybe Jameson didn’t know everything there was to know about her but he was sure he wanted to know more.

And he’d make it his mission to find out, Jameson decided, as he stood there, still grinning like a damn fool.

\* \* \*

Sadie sat patiently in front of the bank loan officer as he thumbed through the sketches she’d drawn up of her plans for Pemberley.

She’d worked hard on them over the past week, trying to bring her vision for the farm to life. If the bank could just see what a fabulous opportunity it was, then maybe they’d be willing to give her the loan.

Carlotta and Ryleigh had offered to come with her but Sadie insisted she could do this by herself. She wanted to prove to her grandparents that she was capable enough to handle running their new business venture.

Besides, Grandma Mae was too busy with Grandpa Cliff for Sadie to bother her. And Ryleigh was already swamped, baking a bunch of goodies they could sell at the Paola Farmer's Market this weekend. Carlotta had a friend in California helping her with ideas for their website and she was focused on launching a social media platform for the farm.

Everyone else was doing their part and Sadie needed to do hers, too.

She'd woken up that morning feeling confident as she'd slipped into the respectable-looking, blue dress Carlotta had lent her. Her favorite nude heels and a sophisticated updo completed the look.

She was going for trustworthy entrepreneur.

As she'd stood in her childhood bedroom, checking herself out in the full-length mirror, Sadie believed she'd nailed it.

That was, of course, before her second run-in with Jameson McDaniels.

Did he have to show up again on one of the most important days of her entire life?

She needed the bank to approve the loan. Sadie's whole plan was sunk if she couldn't get the funds for renovating. This was the only option she had. Without a sizable chunk of

collateral, Sadie didn't know of any other bank besides Fontana Savings and Loans that might be willing to take a chance on her.

Sadie fidgeted in her chair, growing impatient for the loan officer to say something. He'd been looking over her drawings along with her bank application for quite a while. She closed her eyes, offering up a silent prayer that luck would be on her side today.

"These are quite good," Mr. Brooks, the loan officer, said cheerfully. He must have arrived in Fontana after she'd left because she'd never seen him before.

"Thank you," Sadie said, a polite smile on her face. She hoped she didn't look too desperate. She certainly felt like a dog drooling over a bone.

Mr. Brooks looked at her application again and Sadie bit down on her lower lip to keep from screaming. The wait was agonizing. He finally looked up at Sadie as he stacked her drawings into a neat pile and slid them across his desk toward her.

"This is a very creative vision you have for the farm," Mr. Brooks said as Sadie held her breath. "I can tell you've put a lot of work into this. And I admire your courage to begin such an undertaking."

"Thank you."

"Unfortunately, at this time, I cannot approve your loan," Mr. Brooks said, looking at her with sympathy. "Believe me, I

would love to help you out. You seem like a nice, young lady and your grandparents are well-respected in this community. But my hands are tied.”

Words were coming from his mouth, but she had a hard time understanding them. There was a rushing sound in her ears, like an ocean wave cresting, swallowing Sadie whole.

She shook her head, trying to clear it. “I’m sorry—what did you say?”

Mr. Brooks folded his hands on the desk. “The bank will not be able to approve your loan application, Ms. Barnhart. I’m terribly sorry.”

Sadie found herself speechless as she stared at Mr. Brooks, open-mouthed, and blinked back tears. She exhaled sharply and stood, extending her hand toward the loan officer. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Brooks.”

They shook hands and Sadie couldn’t get out of his office quick enough, afraid the tears would leak out if she stayed a moment longer.

With her head down and her carrier of carefully-drawn farm sketches hugged tight to her body, Sadie hurried out of the bank.

All she wanted to do was go home, take a hot bath, and have a good cry.

As she pushed through the bank’s exit doors, she felt the wetness on her cheeks and quickly wiped it away. The streets

were nearly deserted and Sadie sighed in relief as she walked toward her grandmother's truck.

“How did your important meeting go?”

Sadie's whole body stiffened as Jameson's voice sliced through her.

Why did he always seem to show up in the middle of her humiliation?

Swallowing hard, she turned to face him, tears of despair turning to white-hot rage.

“How did it go?” Sadie snapped. “For your information, it went perfectly awful.”

Oh God, why did she just blurt that out?

She supposed her emotions were on overdrive at the moment and, as such, she had no filter. Sadie's mouth settled into a hard line. She vowed not to share any other personal tidbits.

Jameson frowned. “I'm sorry to hear that. Do you mind me asking what the meeting was about?”

“Actually, I do mind.” She stepped toward him. “I mind a lot. My life is none of your business. So, for the last time, I would appreciate it if you would kindly leave me the hell alone!” Sadie's entire body shook with anger. God, she was furious. How dare he think he was entitled to know her personal affairs?

Jameson raised both hands in front of his chest. “I meant no offense. You just look upset and I thought you could use a sympathetic ear.”

“Not from you, I don’t.” Sadie took a step forward, pointing a finger at Jameson. “I need nothing from you.” She was going to be sick if she stood there much longer, Sadie thought, as the nausea washed over her. Clutching her stomach, Sadie whirled around and walked toward the truck.

When she finally opened the driver’s side door and slid behind the wheel, Jameson was nowhere to be seen.

He was gone.

\* \* \*

Sadie stretched her legs out in front of her, crossing them at the ankle, as she took a long swig of her Rosé.

After a long soak in the tub, she felt considerably better and more like herself. Wearing her favorite jeans, white tank, soft blue sweater, and worn leather sandals. Her hair hanging loose around her shoulders.

Carlotta had suggested an evening of wine and sampling Ryleigh’s latest culinary creations on the patio. They sat in Grandma Mae’s floral-cushioned, white wicker chairs, enjoying the cool night air and commiserating over Sadie’s failed bank meeting.

“At least Mr. Brooks was nice about it.” Dressed casually in jeans and a faded gray KSU t-shirt, Ryleigh reached for a cinnamon roll from the delectable spread on the table.



With her blond curls pulled into a tail and bare feet, Ryleigh looked more like a teenager than a young woman in her late twenties. She crossed her legs as she sipped from her wine glass. “I think there should definitely be points for politeness. It wasn’t his fault he couldn’t approve the loan.”

“I know that, Ry,” Sadie said, looking from Ryleigh’s sympathetic smile to Carlotta’s frown. “But it doesn’t change the fact that we can’t move forward without that loan.” She set her glass beside her feet on the smooth wooden deck.

“Well, we have to think of something,” Carlotta said. “I refuse to let us give up. There has to be another way.” She wore a simple sundress with spaghetti straps and purple flowers, her long legs tucked beneath her. Flipping her illustrious dark hair over one shoulder, she lifted her glass in salute. “We are smart, capable, independent women and Sadie’s idea for the farm is amazing.” She grinned at them. “Now we just need to find someone willing to take a chance on us.”

“Here, here.” Ryleigh raised her glass in agreement. “I’ll drink to that.”

The three of them clinked glasses then each took a swig of Rosé.

“Excuse me.”

Sadie turned to see Jameson McDaniels standing there. On her back patio. She couldn’t even retreat to her own home to get away from him. What was the world coming to?

“Ladies, I apologize for interrupting your evening,” Jameson said, giving Carlotta and Ryleigh one of his dazzling smiles. He wore dark jeans, a green button-down with the sleeves rolled to the elbow, and black slip-on Vans. Casual attire. As if he’d dropped by to hang out with old friends.

She didn’t like it one bit. Her jaw locked as she stared at the empty glass in her hand.

“I knocked on the front door but no one answered. I heard voices back here so I decided to check it out.”

Sadie refused to meet his gaze, her emotions warring within her.

Besides, she’d said everything she needed to say that morning.

Why would he think it was okay to come here when she’d made it perfectly clear she wanted him to stay away?

Why couldn’t he just leave her alone?

Carlotta cleared her throat and nudged Sadie with her elbow. When she looked over at her friend, Carlotta raised her eyebrows as if to say ‘Why aren’t you answering him?’

But Sadie remained stubbornly silent.

Before things could get any more awkward, Ryleigh covered for her deliberate rudeness. “It’s so nice to see you, Jameson. What can we do for you?”

“I was hoping to speak to Sadie for a few minutes.”

“Sure you can talk to Sadie.” Carlotta gave Sadie a pointed look before continuing. “Ryleigh and I were about to step inside and—grab another bottle of wine, weren’t we?” She stood, smoothing out her sundress.

“Yes,” Ryleigh said. “Your timing couldn’t have been more perfect.” She slipped into her flip-flops and squeezed Sadie’s shoulder before following Carlotta inside.

Some friends, Sadie thought, as she watched them leave. A couple of Benedict Arnolds—abandoning her to deal with Jameson by herself.

They had some nerve.

A nearby cricket chirped its night song, filling the silence between them.

Jameson finally cleared his throat. He pointed at the chair Ryleigh had previously occupied. “May I sit?”

Sadie shrugged. “If you must.”

With wary eyes, she watched him slide into the deck chair beside hers.

His presence felt suffocating. Constricting like a vice. A relentless grip that encircled her neck, refusing to release its hold.

It left Sadie yearning for the sweet relief of freedom, a comfort that only his immediate departure could bring.

“I have a business proposition for you,” he said, eyebrows raised as if he were offering Sadie a challenge.

“What kind of business proposition?”

“I heard about what happened at the bank today,” Jameson said quietly.

“What do you mean?”

“I spoke with Mr. Brooks.”

“You had no right to meddle in my business!” Sadie snapped, the heat rushing to her face.

She pushed herself up from the wicker chair, intent on joining her friends inside.

But Jameson stopped her, placing his hand lightly on her arm. “Please—just hear me out. That’s all I’m asking.”

With great reluctance, she sat back down, frowning. “You have three minutes.”

“Mr. Brooks told me about your plan for the farm. He said you lacked the requisite collateral for the bank to issue a loan in the amount you requested.”

All Sadie could do was stare at him, trying to find the words but coming up short. What right did he or Mr. Brooks have discussing *her* plan?

She rubbed her forehead with the pads of her fingers. He really was exasperating. But after her disheartening morning, she didn’t have the strength to fight anymore.

Best to let him say his piece and be on his way.

Jameson cleared his throat. “So I told Mr. Brooks I would put up the collateral for the loan.”

“What?” Her whole body tensed as she leaned toward him, trying to make sense of what he was saying.

“Sadie Barnhart, McDaniel Properties would like to partner with you in your new business venture. I think your ideas are amazing and I’d like to come on board as your investor.”

Part of her wanted to scream in frustration and the other half wanted to leap for joy. Though Sadie’s guard remained intact, a tiny glimmer of curiosity sparked within her.

And the first blossom of promise.

“I had the bank draw up the paperwork.” Jameson talked fast as if he were afraid she’d give him the boot at any moment. “It’s all fairly standard in regard to our compensation agreement. Feel free to have your lawyer look this over but I assure you it’s all above board.”

“You want to help me renovate Pemberley Farm,” she repeated slowly, feeling quite stunned.

“I do.” Jameson smiled, his green eyes sparkling in the glow of the soft patio lighting. “Or rather, McDaniel Properties does.”

Sadie was keenly aware of how close he was—and of how much she still despised him. Sitting there, acting so benevolent. And so very different from the entitled teenage boy she’d grown up with. To be perfectly honest, she found the whole thing completely baffling. And very suspect.

It left her puzzling over what his real endgame was.

She cleared her throat. “I envisioned a small family business. Having an investor might change things in a way that I’m not comfortable with.”

“How about this—I could be a silent investor. Meaning, I wouldn’t have a say in the daily operations or decisions.” When Sadie said nothing, Jameson sighed. “Look, I’ve been searching for ways to expand our brand, and partnering with you on your family farm project seems ideal.”

“So you’re interested in the farm as a business opportunity?” Sadie asked, eyeing him with suspicion. She had a hard time taking him at his word given their history.

But was she being foolish by clinging to their bitter past and not accepting the olive branch he was extending? When accepting his proposal could mean the difference between saving and losing her grandparents’ farm.

“Of course,” Jameson said. “This is just business. But I do admire the hell out of you, Sadie—for working so hard to help your family.”

“Thank you.”

Had he just paid her a genuine compliment? She didn’t know how she felt about that.

“I have the paperwork in my car.” Jameson stood, looking down at Sadie, hands stuffed into his pockets. “I’ll leave it with you and you can take some time to think things over before getting back to me. How does that sound?”

Sadie pressed her lips together, considering his terms.

“I think...that sounds fair, Jameson.”

But as she watched him walk away, conflicting emotions swirled within her like a tempestuous storm inside a delicate teacup. They collided and intertwined, creating a whirlwind of maddening sensations. It left her feeling both exhilarated and overwhelmed as she tried to navigate the intricate labyrinth of her feelings.

With one relentless, overbearing thought pounding through Sadie’s mind.

Could she really trust him?

Only time would tell. But Sadie couldn’t deny the tiny ember of hope that ignited within her fragile heart.

And she desperately prayed Jameson wouldn’t find a way to shatter it a second time.

# Chapter Four



**T**WO WEEKS PASSED as Sadie settled into life back at Pemberley.

She'd talked things over with her grandparents and Ryleigh and Carlotta. They'd all agreed accepting Jameson's proposal was their best course of action.

Her grandparents' lawyer had poured over the contract. McDaniel Properties was offering up the collateral so they could refinance the loan her grandparents took out years ago. The proposed compensation schedule was fairly standard at fifteen percent return on all profits generated after they opened Pemberley up to the public.

And dammit if that didn't leave her feeling even more annoyed. Jameson was being so agreeable and decent—what the hell was she supposed to make of that?

As the sun rose in the sky, Sadie tied her sneakers, feeling eager to start her morning walk. She'd claimed this little slice of time for herself, to be alone with her thoughts.

Plus, it was doctor-ordered therapy for her ankle.



The early morning air smelled of freshly-cut grass and the honey-sweet tulips in her grandmother's flower garden. Adjusting her Chicago Cubs cap over her ponytail, she headed toward her favorite trail that snaked around the small pond at the edge of the property beside her beloved blue junipers. She liked to visit the trees once a day, grazing her hand over the one that belonged to her father.

She could still remember the day Grandpa Cliff had given her a blue juniper of her own. So vividly, it felt like it had happened only yesterday. Ten years old and heartbroken, she'd looked up, to see Grandpa Cliff standing on the porch with a small, potted tree in hand.

"It looks like a baby Christmas tree," she'd said, cracking half a smile—the first one in what felt like days.

Her grandfather had chuckled. "Your father said the same thing when he was around your age." He'd held out a hand to Sadie. "Let's take a walk."

With a sigh, she'd pushed herself off the porch swing and taken her grandfather's hand.

They'd walked toward the edge of Pemberley Farm as the light rain slowed. Grandpa Cliff had stopped at a row of big, bushy trees not far from the pond. Her father used to always take her fishing there when they'd visit the farm during summer break.

Just looking at the water had made Sadie's stomach hurt.

“These are juniper trees—Wichita Blue,” Grandpa Cliff had said, his blue eyes twinkling. “My great-great-grandfather, William Barnhart, planted the first one when he claimed this land in 1857. Believed the juniper was a symbol of life, of fertile soil, and of good things to come.” He’d touched the bluish-green foliage of the first towering tree in the row.

To Sadie, they’d all looked like enormous Christmas trees—the kind you saw all lit up for the holidays at Rockefeller Center.

They’d moved down the row, pausing in front of another tree.

“My daddy presented me with my blue juniper when I was a few years younger than you.” His fingers had grazed the blue-green needles as he spoke reverently. “And I asked my high school sweetheart to marry me under this tree some ten years later.”

“Grandma Mae?” Sadie had asked, her curiosity piqued.

Grandpa Cliff had chuckled. “She’s always been the love of my life.”

Walking a few steps further, they’d come upon one a little smaller than the others.

“This here was my son, Jamie’s tree.” He’d brushed his hand across the foliage as if it were something precious. “He proposed to your mama in this very spot.”

Sadie’s eyes had blurred as she’d stared up at the tree.

Oh, how she'd longed to see her parents again. To hold them close and never let go. To have her mother brush her long red hair from her face and tell her everything would be okay. To hear her father's merry laugh as he told a funny story at the dinner table.

"And now it's your turn." Grandpa Cliff had moved to a vacant spot at the end of the row where a hole had been dug. Pulling the small Christmas tree from the pot, he'd placed it in the dirt hole and used a nearby shovel to pack the soil around it. "Sadie Barnhart, this is your very own blue juniper."

"You're giving me a tree?" she'd asked in a small voice, staring up at her grandfather with a tiny smile.

"One day, Sadie girl, one day, all this will be yours."

Sadie grinned, cherishing the sacred memory. A honey-suckle warmth swept through her, radiating every cell within, each fiber of her being. The sensation was its own soft embrace, both comforting and familiar, drenched in the joyful sunshine of nostalgia. And she clung to it like a lifeline, breathing in every last beautiful detail.

For that was the day a broken ten-year-old girl finally started to mend, one small piece at a time.

She hummed to herself as she adjusted her headphones and put on her favorite playlist.

As she walked briskly along the dirt path by the pond, her thoughts inevitably drifted to Pemberley and their battle to save it.

The Paola Farmer's Market had been a huge success. Ryleigh's baked goodies had generated lots of sales along with her grandmother's prizewinning jams and Pemberley's produce. Carlotta had also printed dozens of glossy fliers they'd distributed to customers announcing the launch of their website and online shop.

It was all coming together, Sadie thought. And a surprising jolt of excitement punched her in the stomach like an unexpected burst of fireworks across a night sky. It sent a shiver of delight racing through her veins, reminding her that life was filled with unpredictability and, at times, sheer magic.

She walked a little further along the trail, her mind shifting to her dance career and the life she'd left behind in Chicago. The ankle injury had sidelined her for weeks. Then Grandpa Cliff's sudden heart attack had shaken all of them up. Now she had this great idea to save the farm. And thanks to McDaniel Properties, they had a way to make it happen.

Maybe it was all a sign. Maybe she was right where she was supposed to be.

And maybe it was time to let go of her dream to someday dance on Broadway.

As she climbed the front porch stairs, her grandmother's voice floated through the screen door, filling the house with its warmth. When she went inside, she found Grandma Mae talking on the phone as she bustled about the kitchen.

Sadie poured herself a cup of coffee and added some milk with two packets of sugar then sat down at the kitchen table.

Grandma Mae mouthed to Sadie she was on the phone with her brother.

Sadie nodded, taking a long sip from her cup. She felt rejuvenated after her long walk and, as the first jolt of caffeine hit her system, she poured over the design sketches she'd left out on the table after finishing them last night.

With construction on the barn starting next week, the main house and outdoor shed they were renovating for her grandparents' apartment would soon follow. Everyone had loved her building sketches but now she was trying to figure out the new decor and color schemes for each one.

She'd always had a passion for art and interior design. She'd even taken some exploratory classes in each subject while she was at ISU. Antiquing was also something she enjoyed whenever she found the time—and money. Watching an episode or two of *Roadshow Antiques* on a quiet evening was one of her favorite guilty pleasures.

“Elijah's coming home for a visit,” Grandma Mae said as she pulled out a chair for herself at the kitchen table.

“Really?” Sadie set her cup down, smiling at her grandmother. “That's wonderful news. When we talked last, he wasn't sure if he could get the time off from the hospital.”

“They agreed to give him a week's leave so he could be on hand when your grandfather comes home.” Grandma Mae beamed at Sadie, her blue eyes shining. “Having both my grandchildren home again is like a dream come true.”

Sadie reached for her grandmother's soft hand. "There's no place we'd rather be."

"We're so proud of you both. And your plans for the farm are incredible, Sadie. You never cease to amaze me."

"I'm glad to hear I'm a revelation," Sadie said, grinning. "But I can't take all the credit. Without you, Ryleigh, and Carlotta, this would only be a pipe dream."

"And what about that Jameson McDaniels? He's certainly come in handy since you've been home."

Sadie shrugged, avoiding her grandmother's eagle-eyed gaze. "Yeah, I guess."

"I know there's some bad blood between you and that's left a bitter taste in your mouth. All I'm saying is people can change if you give them room to grow. And it seems to me that boy has grown into a fine, young man."

Sadie stood and took her empty cup over to load in the dishwasher. Discussing Jameson was the last thing she felt like doing. He was like her own personal ghost, lingering in the recesses of her mind, haunting her with his mere existence.

"It's your business, of course. But it's nice to see you put your personal feelings aside and work with him."

Sadie shrugged again but it was clear her grandmother wanted to hear her thoughts on the matter. "I haven't seen him since the night he stopped by. We've spoken on the phone a few times since then. And—if he holds up his end of the deal

about remaining *silent*,” she stressed the word for emphasis, “then I think this could work.”

Or rather, it *had* to work.

Because she was completely out of options.

Grandma Mae cleared her throat, pushing away from the table. “Well, I’d better get myself ready to head over to the hospital. Your grandfather likes me to be there while he eats breakfast.”

“I’m sure he knows how lucky he is.”

“We’re both lucky.” Grandma smiled. “That man can sure drive me crazy but he’s my whole world.” She gave Sadie’s cheek a goodbye pat before leaving the kitchen.

Her grandmother’s lavender perfume lingered in the air as she made her way upstairs.

Sadie settled herself at the table to continue working on decor and accent colors. Then she poured through her favorite antiquing websites on her phone, bookmarking her favorites to show the girls. Before she knew it, an hour had passed.

A sudden knock at the back door pulled her out of work mode.

Ryleigh poked her head inside the screen door. “We brought muffins to sample.”

“By all means, bring them in,” Sadie said, grinning at her.

Ryleigh and Carlotta breezed into the kitchen as Sadie pulled two cups from the cupboard and filled them with hot

coffee. Lots of sugar and a little milk for Ryleigh while Carlotta took lots of milk but no sugar. She knew their coffee orders as well as her own—mostly black with a little sugar and milk.

When they were settled at the table with Ryleigh's fabulous blueberry muffins and hot coffee, Carlotta said. "I have some news."

Sadie took a small bite of her muffin, savoring the sweetness on her tongue. "What is it?"

"I'm very pleased to announce that our Pemberley Farm website will be fully operational by the end of this week. Jeremiah, my computer whiz consultant, says we can start taking orders from the online shop as early as next week."

Ryleigh clapped her hands with excitement. "I can't wait. I have a slew of new recipes to try out this week. But if the Farmer's Market is any indication of how online orders will go, then I'll more than likely need some help. I spoke with my parents and they're fine with me using the kitchen at Porters for baking. I figure I can get there early in the morning before they open—maybe around four. And then, of course, I could use the kitchen later, in the evening, when business slows down."

"Goodness, Ry, that's a lot of trouble for you to go through," Sadie said, frowning. "I'm happy to help fill orders. I'm not great in the kitchen but I can follow instructions. I'm thinking we may need to hire a few part-time workers to help out."



“I already thought of that. My parents said they could schedule some of the restaurant staff to help out in the early mornings and evenings. There are a few college kids home for the summer that might be interested. My parents will pay their wages and, as our business grows, we can reimburse the restaurant for expenses. You know they adore your grandparents. And they want to help out in any way they can.”

Sadie smiled, blinking back tears. “Your parents are the best people I know—besides my grandparents.”

“Here, here!” Carlotta raised her coffee in salute.

“You’ve really thought of everything. Eventually, we’ll be working out of the renovated barn once it’s converted into the dining area. You’ll have to think about hiring staff and someone to manage during the school year. But I’ll leave that up to you.”

“Compared to Ryleigh, I feel like a slacker,” Carlotta said, cradling her coffee cup in her hands.

“Nonsense,” Sadie said. “You’ve done an excellent job on the website and without that, we wouldn’t even have online orders to fill.”

“That’s true,” said Carlotta, smoothing her hair around her face. “Though it was mostly my computer-inclined friend who did the grunt work.” She pointed her finger toward the sky. “But I did use my powers of feminine persuasion to convince him to help us for a significantly discounted rate. “

“Exactly,” Ryleigh said, patting Carlotta’s hand. “We’d be lost without you and your feminine powers.”

“Now, all I can do is hope those feminine powers land me that commercial I’m auditioning for next week,” Carlotta said, taking a sip of her coffee. “Remember, I’ll fly out on Monday but then I’m coming back the following Friday.”

“Of course,” Sadie said. “I’m just grateful we got to have you here as long as we did.”

“The life of a starving artist is paved with annoying casting calls and many trips to the golden coast.” Carlotta sighed for effect. “I’ll also be shooting for a print catalog while I’m there. Easy job—nice-size paycheck. But, I promise I’ll work on finalizing the itinerary of day and evening activities for our guests. I’ve had a lot of ideas...now I just need to choose the best ones.”

“You’ll be sorely missed, Car.” Sadie downed the last of her coffee and set the empty cup on the table.

“So are we not going to talk about the elephant in the room?” Carlotta asked.

They both eyed Sadie expectantly.

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

Except she had a sneaking suspicion she did.

Carlotta threw up her hands. “Oh, come on! What’s going on with you and Jameson McDaniels?”

“Nothing,” Sadie said quickly. “Absolutely nothing. Now, can we please change the subject?”

Her friends exchanged a glance.

Ryleigh took a long swig of coffee, eyes downcast. Carlotta leaned back in her chair, arms folded across her ample cleavage.

“I don’t buy that for a second,” Carlotta said.

“What don’t you buy?” Sadie asked, feeling exasperated.

“I just think that if you can’t be honest with your two best friends then something’s wrong,” Carlotta said.

“I *am* being honest. Why does no one believe me?”

“We do believe you,” Ryleigh said quickly. “Leave her alone, Car. If she doesn’t want to talk about it then we shouldn’t pester her.”

Sadie sighed, closing her eyes. “What will it take for you both to believe me when I say nothing is going on? Nothing at all. I promise. And if that changes—which it won’t—you’ll be the first to know.”

“Well—so long as we’re the first,” Carlotta said with a wink.

After breakfast, Ryleigh skirted off to Porters. And Carlotta, wanting to get some work done on the website, headed back to Ryleigh’s apartment. She’d claimed the guest room as her own.

Sadie changed into jeans and sturdy work boots then began her farm chores. Their foreman, Mr. Sloane, had taken two weeks off to head to the Colorado mountains for a camping trip with his wife. He'd offered to cancel but they'd been planning the trip for over a year. So Sadie had insisted he go.

Sadie made the rounds, like she did every morning, checking in with the part-time day farmhand who worked alongside Mr. Sloane. She inquired about the livestock, making sure there were no sudden issues that had popped up since yesterday.

In Mr. Sloane's absence, she was in charge of feeding the livestock and milking the cows, in addition to collecting the eggs from the hen house for Grandma Mae.

Sadie didn't mind the work. It felt good to get her hands dirty on the farm again after spending so many years in the city. As she went about her chores, Sadie found herself thinking about Jameson—or specifically, about their rotten past.

Everyone wanted her to just pretend like he hadn't spent their school years trying to make her life miserable. Sadie shook her head as she loaded a variety of food scraps into the large trough for the pigs. The way Jameson had treated her—that wasn't something she could just forget.

Making her way toward the barn to milk the cows, a vision of her ten-year-old self flashed through her mind. The first time she'd seen Jameson McDaniels it'd been the middle of fifth grade, when she'd just arrived in Fontana right after her

parents' accident. She'd stood, terrified and fidgety, before her new classmates while Jameson had sat, pointing and laughing with his friends, in the back of the classroom. And she'd wanted nothing more than to crawl out of her own skin.

Just reliving the humiliating moment filled Sadie's eyes.

The night of her parents' funeral, she'd been so distraught. After everyone left, she'd taken a pair of kitchen shears and hacked off her long hair. The uneven outcome had been a dreadful cross between little orphan Annie and Alfalfa from *The Little Rascals*.

To this day, Sadie still couldn't explain what had possessed her to do it.

All she remembered was looking at her reflection and thinking about her mom brushing her hair every night before bed and—well, perhaps she'd needed to rid herself of the fresh pain that accompanied the memory.

And since she couldn't hack out her heart, she'd opted to cut the only thing she could.

It'd taken ages for her hair to grow back—something Jameson hadn't let her forget for the rest of fifth grade. He'd taunted her on the playground, calling her scarecrow because of her gangly limbs and tufts of hair sticking up like straw.

The only person to show her kindness that year had been Ryleigh Porter. On that first day of school, she'd taken Sadie under her wing, breaking her homemade chocolate chip cookie in half at lunch so they could share.

When Sadie finished feeding the cows, she stomped out of the barn, enjoying the crunch of hay under her work boots as she continued to seethe about Jameson. As if his behavior in fifth grade wasn't enough of a reason to hate him, there was also what he'd done to her in middle school.

First week of seventh grade and her first time wearing a bra. Feeling self-conscious, she'd walked down the hallway, hugging her books tight to her chest. Her hair had grown out by then and she'd worn it braided down her back.

Before she could reach her locker, someone had snapped the back of her bra—so loudly that everyone around could hear the deafening pop. Her face flaming, she'd raced to the girls' bathroom.

Sadie could still hear the snickers as she'd darted through the crowded hall. And as the bathroom door swung behind her, she'd caught a glimpse of Jameson McDaniels, surrounded by a group of boys, laughing his ass off.

Sure, you could chalk his behavior up to pubescent shenanigans, boys will be boys and all that—but it still didn't excuse his worst offense.

Sadie made her way to the hen house, thankful it was her last farm chore. Grabbing the basket they used for such things, she reached her hand carefully into the small house and began retrieving the eggs.

High school had gone considerably better for Sadie than elementary and middle school. Up until then, she'd been

painfully shy. But she'd had Ryleigh to get her through—and her dancing.

Ever since Sadie could walk, she'd been dancing. There were even old videos of her dancing around the living room as a toddler. Her parents had given Sadie ballet slippers and a pink tutu for her fourth birthday. Right after, she'd begged her mom to let her be a ballerina. So her mother had enrolled her at a dance studio near their apartment in Chicago and the rest was history.

She'd kept up her dancing, even after moving to Pemberley. Spent hours practicing in the barn or down by the pond. She'd also enrolled along with Ryleigh at Fontana's local dance studio—Ms. Audrey's.

Sadie had been determined to attend the School of American Ballet someday and start a professional career as a dancer. But life was full of gotcha moments—just waiting around the corner to pounce when you least expected them.

Carlotta Everclear had moved to Fontana with her mom right after her parents divorced. Having grown up in California, her natural flair for drama along with her undeniable beauty had made her instantly popular. She'd arrived the summer before ninth grade and, for some reason unbeknownst to Sadie, the three of them had instantly clicked.

Sadie entered high school with new-found confidence having Carlotta and Ryleigh by her side. Carlotta convinced Ryleigh and Sadie to try out for pep squad with her and Sadie's star continued to rise. No longer was she an object of

ridicule, having finally grown into her long limbs. And she'd even made pep squad co-captain her senior year, alongside Carlotta.

After collecting the eggs, Sadie latched the doors to the hen house and headed toward the main, still caught in a fog of memories. She pulled off her work boots at the screen door leading to the kitchen.

As she turned to gaze out at the horizon, Sadie felt torn between holding onto the past and opening her heart to new possibilities. It was like standing at an impossible crossroad. She couldn't seem to stop wrestling with the bittersweet dichotomy of hanging on and letting go. An invisible tug-of-war within her battle-scarred heart.

And what Jameson McDaniels had done their senior year of high school—it wasn't something she could ever forget.

Or forgive.

No matter how long he kept up his Mr. Nice Guy routine.

\* \* \*

A week later, Sadie was helping Ryleigh wash dishes in the rustic kitchen at Porters when the sweet sound of a bell chimed, announcing a customer's arrival. Wiping her hands on the crisp white cloth she'd tied around her waist as a makeshift apron, she told Ryleigh she would get the door.

But nothing could've prepared her for the person standing there, grinning back at her.



“Hey, sis!”

Running from behind the counter, she threw her arms around her brother’s neck, breathing in the familiar scent of his cologne tinged with a hint of hospital disinfectant. “Eli, I can’t believe you’re here! It feels like I haven’t seen you in ages.” She pulled away so she could stare up at him. “Your hair needs trimming.”

He ran a hand through his unruly copper waves. “Grandma Mae said the same thing. She’s already made an appointment in town.”

“I bet she has.” Sadie grinned. “It’s so good to see you.”

There would always be a closeness between them despite their two-year age difference. Sadie guessed that was how it was when you’d experienced trauma together at such a young age. And for that first year on the farm, they’d been practically inseparable. Things got better with time, of course, but their bond had always remained unbreakable.

“I’m on my way to the hospital to see Grandpa Cliff but I wanted to pop in and see you first. Grandma Mae told me where you were.”

Sadie nodded. “How long is the good doctor staying for?”

Elijah rolled his eyes, looking like his twelve-year-old self. “I’ve only done clinical rotations so I don’t know if you can call me that yet.”

“Eli, you’re a doctor now. You work at a hospital and see patients and wear the white coat and the whole nine yards.

Better get used to it, little brother.”

He held up his hands in protest. “Okay, okay. Yes, but I’m technically still just a med student. And my white coat is pretty awesome. It’s still sinking in, though.”

“You know I couldn’t be prouder of you, right?”

He grinned down at her and Sadie was struck by how much he looked like their father. The notion sent a pinprick through her heart.

“How’s everything going out—” Ryleigh gave a little shriek as she came through the swinging door, covering her mouth with both hands. “Oh my goodness! Look who it is!”

“Hey Ryleigh,” her brother said, giving a slight wave in her friend’s direction.

She did a cute little run and threw her arms around Elijah’s neck. When they pulled apart, her cheeks were flushed with color, her green eyes bright and glistening.

“The hospital gave me the week off to see Grandpa. I’ll leave next Saturday.” Elijah folded his arms as he stared from Ryleigh to Sadie. “So...is someone going to fill me on this great idea you have to save Pemberley?”

“So Grandma Mae already told you,” said Sadie.

“And I’m just wondering why you didn’t. Unless I’m no longer part of this family.” He said it with a smile so Sadie knew he must not be too upset.

“I didn’t want to bug you while you were studying for your exams,” said Sadie.

“Okay, thanks for that. But in the future don’t keep me out of the loop, alright?” He looked sternly from Sadie to Ryleigh.

“Of course, we won’t,” Ryleigh said quickly, glancing in her direction. “Right, Sadie?”

“Yes, okay. Fine. Do you have time to hear about it now?”

“Yeah, I do. But I could use a cup of coffee and one of those cherry Danish things from the glass dish on the counter if it’s going to take a while.”

“Coming right up,” said Ryleigh, rushing off to fill his order.

Sadie must’ve been staring up at him because Elijah gave her a puzzled look. “What is it?”

“I’m just really glad you’re here. I’ve missed you so much.”

He grinned down at her. “Right back at you, big sis. Now why don’t we sit down and you can fill me in on your amazing plan.”

Barely able to contain her excitement, she led him to a vacant table in the corner of the room. And she began sharing her vision with Eli, pride swelling inside her as she spoke of their extraordinary progress with the farm plans and their new online venture.

\* \* \*

Renovations on the main barn at Pemberley began on Monday. And things were starting to click into place, much to Sadie's satisfaction.

Carlotta had launched their online website with the option to buy farm products and Ryleigh's baked creations. Within a few days, orders had skyrocketed and they were barely keeping up. The Porters were in the process of hiring more part-time staff to help Ryleigh with the surge.

Sadie pitched in at Porters whenever she found the time. And thank goodness Carlotta would be coming back to Fontana at the end of the week. She'd extended her stay in LA for another round of auditions.

Grandpa Cliff had come home from the hospital and Elijah was helping out, accompanying him to physical therapy. Grandma Mae seemed lighter these days. Sadie would catch her singing in the kitchen while she was making dinner or washing dishes.

It made Sadie happy to see everything coming together. As if all of her hard work wasn't in vain.

She found herself alone in the kitchen, enjoying the after-dinner quiet, with time on her hands. Elijah was out for the night, visiting an old friend. And her grandparents had turned in early. After his afternoon physical therapy and a generous helping of Grandma Mae's award-winning chili, her grandfather was ready for bed. Sadie had volunteered to clean the kitchen so Grandma Mae could settle him for the night.

It was still early—half-past eight. So she sat at the kitchen table with her laptop, a mug of instant cocoa beside her, and perused her favorite antiquing websites, intent on finding some hidden gems to decorate their guest rooms with.

It might be nice to have a theme for each room...

Sadie hardly noticed the whispering raindrops outside until they became more persistent. Rising from the table, she opened the backdoor to have a look. At that exact moment, a lightning flash illuminated the sky, followed by a deafening boom of thunder.

It was so pretty—the way it lit up the sky for that fleeting moment.

Standing there, watching the storm unfold, a throat-tightening panic set in as she suddenly remembered Pemberley's livestock—the dozen or so cows and pigs—now housed in the auxiliary barn because of the renovations. It was a considerable hike from the main house and located on the outer edge of the property.

Mr. Sloane usually handled such things or, in the before times, Grandpa Cliff did. But, as their foreman was not due back from vacation until early next week, the burden fell squarely on Sadie's shoulders.

She threw a blue rain slicker over her t-shirt and leggings, slipping socked feet into her grandmother's purple polka-dot rain boots, lined up with the other outside shoes by the back door. She shoved her phone into her raincoat pocket and ran outside, praying she wasn't too late.

Why in the blazes hadn't she remembered to check the weather forecast that morning?

From the look of the overcast evening sky earlier in the afternoon, she'd reasoned there might be some rain. But watching the wind whip around her as the lightning quickened its pace, she realized her grave miscalculation.

With stubborn determination, Sadie sprinted toward the auxiliary barn, ignoring the protests of her recovering ankle. She had to move the livestock to one of the three-sided shelters on the property. Luckily, there was one near the auxiliary barn. All she needed to do was herd the animals to safety.

How many times had Grandpa Cliff preached about the dangers of leaving livestock in the barn during bad weather? Sadie scolded herself as she ran through the unrelenting rain. No use crying about it now, she mused. She needed to stay focused on the mission.

Sadie reached the small red barn and breathed a sigh of relief. Unbolting the heavy doors, she heaved the wooden latch upwards so she could enter. They still needed to renovate the space to make it an appropriate size to house their considerable livestock.

A Kansas storm could shift into turbulence on a dime. So she needed to move the livestock. Now.

Sadie retrieved her phone from her coat pocket and punched Ryleigh's number. She answered on the second ring.

“Hey.” Ryleigh sounded exhausted. “I just got home. It’s really picking up out there. Thank God, my apartment’s just down the street from Porters. What’s up?”

“I’m in a bit of a pickle.”

“Why?” Ryleigh asked, her voice laced with concern.

“I’m in the auxiliary barn surrounded by pigs and cows. I should have moved them out before the storm. Now I’m stuck.”

“Do you want me to come help?” Ryleigh asked. “Oh, shoot, my street’s starting to flood.”

“No, don’t risk it,” Sadie said quickly.

Perhaps she should text Eli. But he was pretty far out and it was unlikely he’d get home in time to help. With a deep sigh, she resolved herself to the grueling task at hand. “I better get started. I’ll call you later.”

Sadie took a deep breath, surveying the cramped space. The barn was surrounded by a fenced-in area. And the three-sided shelter lay on the outer edge of the fencing.

If she freed the animals, they might instinctively head in that direction.

Deciding it was her best option, she unlatched the gate housing the cows before unleashing the pigs’ pen.

So far, so good, Sadie thought.

She rushed back into the storm, shouting and waving her arms as she attempted to get the animals to follow her. At the

moment, they were kind of mulling around, making noises that indicated they were spooked by the weather.

Unfortunately, Sadie didn't have the first idea how to herd the frightened animals into the shelter. She was sure her grandfather had walked her through it a few times over the years. But for the life of her, she couldn't remember anything he'd said.

But, somehow, she'd have to figure it out.

Sadie darted between the animals, yelling, waving her arms, and moving toward the shelter. Some of them started to follow her.

It was working!

And thank the good Lord it was.

Cause she was fresh out of ideas.

She watched them file into the shelter, as the rain poured down her face, her long braid slicking to her raincoat and sweet relief coursing through her veins.

Then, a lightning bolt shot across the dark sky. So close to the barnyard that Sadie screamed, stumbling backward.

It vanished as quickly as it appeared—but the damage was already done.

The remaining cows scattered across the yard as they scrambled to take cover.

And to Sadie's horror, one petrified cow had managed to get its head stuck under the fence. It screamed pitifully, clearly



in a full-blown panic.

And all Sadie wanted to do was hang her head and cry.

\* \* \*

Jameson pulled into Pemberley Farm's long, winding driveway.

When he received Ryleigh's call, he'd been having dinner at his parents' house. Since Pemberley was on his way, he told Ryleigh it would be no bother to pop by.

She'd sounded worried on the phone, her words tumbling out so fast, Jameson could hardly follow.

Some issue with the livestock...

At any rate, he was grateful for the excuse to head out to the farm.

And pleased to have a reason to see Sadie again.

What was it about her that had him so intrigued?

Sure, she had the kind of natural beauty that just hit you right in the gut. But it was about more than her being beautiful. He'd been with plenty of beautiful women over the years but none of them had ever gotten their hooks into him the way Sadie had.

Of course, the fact that Sadie seemed to despise him didn't help matters.

Jameson wasn't sure why she hated him so much. They'd barely known each other in high school.

Funny, how you can see someone—how you can even grow up together—and never actually realize who you were looking at. That’s how he felt when he was around Sadie—like he was seeing her for the first time.

The tires of his SUV skidded on the flooded pavement. He eased the car to a stop in front of the main house, locking it behind him. The rain fell in heavy sheets and Jameson was thankful for the black jacket he wore over his white button-down. He wrapped it around him like a shield as he trudged through the muddy grass.

He was relieved to see the red barn in the distance. But then he remembered it was being renovated. The livestock must have been moved to another outbuilding...perhaps another barn on the property.

That had to be it, he decided. Now he just needed to find another building, big enough to house the animals. And he needed to do it fast. The storm was picking up.

Luckily, Jameson didn’t have to search for long. He heard the desperate screeching of what he assumed to be a cow before he arrived at the fence-enclosed barnyard.

There was Sadie in a blue raincoat, completely drenched, attempting to move a cow stuck under the fence.

Jameson ran toward her, splashing mud on his jeans. “Sadie!” he cried out, hoping to be heard above the rain and wind. “Ryleigh asked me to come give you a hand!”

Sadie whipped her head around, staring up at him, the rain cascading down around them.

“I don’t need your help!” she practically growled at him. “I’ve got everything under control!”

“You sure about that?” he asked, gesturing at the cow trapped beneath the fence. “It looks like you could use some help.”

Ooh boy, if looks could kill then the evil, death stare Sadie leveled at him would have sent Jameson straight to the grave.

After a few tense moments between them, she yelled. “Fine! I can’t get this cow to move!”

Jameson didn’t know much about farm life but, growing up in Fontana, more than a few of his friends had lived on a farm. There had been an incident—a harmless prank that took an ugly turn—when he was thirteen, resulting in a spooked cow stuck under a fence. His friend had known how to get the cow unstuck and they’d worked quickly before they were discovered.

“We need to coat its head in some kind of moisturizer.”

“How do you know that?”

“Spoils of a misspent youth. Do you have any cooking oil?”

“In the kitchen.”

“Good. Go get it. I’ll stay here and try to calm her down. But hurry.”

Sadie stared at him for a moment as if considering his request before bolting toward the main house while Jameson crouched beside the cow, petting its head and speaking softly. In what seemed like no time at all, she returned, holding a bottle of olive oil.

“Here,” she said, placing the bottle into his outstretched hands.

Jameson coated the cow’s neck in oil. Sadie soon crouched beside him, pouring oil in her own hands; she copied his movements, massaging oil into the cow’s thick coat.

Her fingers reached under the fence and Jameson swiftly grabbed her hand.

A startled gasp escaped her lips. “What are you doing?”

“That’s a good way to lose a couple fingers. Never put your hand between the cow and the fence, especially when she’s spooked.”

She yanked her hand away. “I know that,” she snapped. “I just—forgot. What are we supposed to do now?”

“We need a shovel,” Jameson said. “And a hand trowel. Got any of those handy?”

Sadie thought for a minute. “Maybe—in the auxiliary barn. I’ll go check.” She ran into the barn and a few minutes later, appeared holding the items.

She dropped the hand trowel on the ground next to Jameson and gripped the shovel with both hands. “Where should I start digging?”

“Why don’t you sit with the cow and keep her calm. I’ll do the digging.”

Sadie shook her head. “No, I can do it.”

“Okay. Dig around the cow but you want to keep a good distance between the shovel and the cow’s head and neck. It could do serious damage.”

Sadie worked quickly, moving the earth underneath the cow with the shovel. Jameson petted the cow’s head, doing his best to distract her. To his relief, the lightning seemed to be moving away from them.

“Okay,” Jameson said, picking up the hand trowel. “You’ve done enough with the shovel. I’ll use the hand trowel to finish the job. Keep her calm.” He pointed at the cow with the smaller shovel.

This time Sadie didn’t argue with him. She settled beside the cow, petting her head and speaking softly as the pounding rain slowed to a sprinkling.

“I think the worst of it might be over.” Jameson gestured toward the sky.

“I hope you’re right,” Sadie said, her eyes fixed on the cow while her hand glided rhythmically over its head.

“Almost got it,” Jameson said. “Then we’ll pull her out nice and slow.”

“You think it’ll work?” Sadie asked.

“It should. I’ve seen it done before. Minus the rainstorm.” He used his hands to dig up the last bit of earth underneath the cow’s head. “Okay, nice and slow,” Jameson coaxed, moving closer to the cow and nudging it gently.

The cow freed itself once it realized that was possible. She wiggled herself out from underneath the fence and mooed at them before trotting away to join the other animals under the shelter.

Jameson wiped soiled hands on his jeans before standing. Sadie stood gracefully at the same time, her eyes fixed on the animals in the shelter.

“You’ll want to keep an eye on her for the next hour or so, make sure there’s no damage from the fence,” Jameson said.

Sadie gave a curt nod, her gaze fixed on the livestock. “I’ll have the vet we use take a look at her tomorrow.”

Then, she turned to him and said, “Thank you...for being here...and for helping me save the cow.” Those intriguing blue eyes gave nothing away as she managed a polite smile.

“It was my pleasure, Sadie.” He smiled at her. “You can always call me—if you find yourself in need of a novice farmhand in the middle of a thunderstorm,” Jameson said with a wink.

Shaking her head, Sadie said, “Let’s hope we never find ourselves in this unfortunate situation again.”

“I was kinda hoping we could—minus the stuck cow and the monsoon, that is.” Might as well take advantage of any

brownie points he'd earned tonight and seize the moment.

Because, frankly, it was getting harder to dance around his feelings for Sadie.

She didn't say anything. Just stared up at him for one long, heart-pounding moment. "Look, I hope I haven't given you the wrong idea, Jameson. This is a strictly-business arrangement between us. And I'm grateful for your help but that doesn't mean my personal feelings are ever going to change." She wiped her muddy hands onto dark leggings.

"While we're on the subject, what are your personal feelings?"

No time like the present to iron things out, Jameson decided. Besides, he'd prefer to know the score between them before he traveled any further down this road.

"My personal feelings?" Sadie repeated. Without warning, she let out a peal of laughter. "How can you even ask me that? Look, I know around here everyone thinks you're the golden boy because of your father and football and..." She gestured at Jameson with her hand, waving it up and down. "All of this," she finished. "But I know you. And there's no way I could ever forget what you did to me."

With that, she took off walking toward the barn, clutching the shovel and hand trowel.

And all Jameson could do was stand there, watching her leave, speechless.

# Chapter Five



**A** FEW DAYS after the storm, Sadie walked into the bank.

But this time, she strolled through the entry doors with confidence, secure in the knowledge that she had the money to make their first back payment on the loan.

As part of the refinancing, she'd asked them to give her a thirty-day extension on the money her grandparents owed in back payments. Though it would take a while to catch up on their payments, this was still a good start.

She walked toward the nearest teller, her brown loafers clicking across the linoleum. Sadie had opted for casual but professional attire—crisp khakis and a button-down, green sleeveless shirt with her hair in a braid. She was heading to Porters afterward to help Ryleigh fill their online orders.

“Good morning, Sandra,” Sadie greeted the teller—a middle-aged woman who regularly played bridge with her grandmother—behind the counter. “I’m here to make a late payment on our bank loan.”

Sandra smiled and began typing furiously on her computer. She stared at the screen for a minute, squinting through her



thick, hard-rimmed glasses. “Sadie, it looks like the late payments on this loan have been taken care of. Your next payment isn’t due until the end of next month. Did you still want to make a payment today?”

Sadie stood there, blinking, turning the information over in her mind. “But that’s impossible—I didn’t make any payments. Are you sure there hasn’t been some mistake?”

“Well, let’s see.” Sandra leaned in closer, studying the screen. “It looks like the payments were made a few weeks ago in one lump sum. I can check to see what account the payment came from if you’ll give me a moment.”

“Yes, thank you,” Sadie said, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

Who would have paid the loan? It’s possible that maybe Ryleigh had done it with her parents’ help. Maybe Porters had floated the missed payments and Ryleigh had wanted to surprise her? Or perhaps Carlotta had called in a favor from someone she knew out in California, some wealthy benefactor she’d been seeing?

“Oh,” Sandra said, smiling. “It seems the account belongs to McDaniel Properties. They’re listed on the loan as one of your investors. Is that right?”

Sadie forced herself to smile, despite her souring stomach. “Yes—of course—that makes perfect sense. I must have forgotten. I’m sorry for wasting your time.”

Sandra waved a hand at Sadie. “Oh, it’s no bother. Say ‘hi’ to your grandmother for me. Tell her we’re all praying for Clifford to make a speedy recovery.”

“Will do.” With a final wave, Sadie turned and hurried toward the exit.

But as she walked, Sadie fumed.

How could Jameson do something like this without talking to her first? This wasn’t their agreement. And more importantly, what was he expecting in return for his generosity?

Just the thought of owing him made her downright uneasy.

She marched down the street and climbed behind the wheel of the truck, slamming the door behind her. It was a short drive to Porters but it gave her time to think, to compose herself.

This was a simple misunderstanding. She would pay Jameson back the money.

There. An easy fix.

Because she refused to owe him anything. She hated Jameson McDaniels. And she always would. Their past couldn’t be rewritten.

He may have the entire town wrapped around his pinky finger but Sadie refused to follow suit. It was clear from his behavior the other night that his intentions weren’t entirely business-minded.

To hell with his Mr. Nice Guy routine, swooping in with his flashy car and trying to save her every flipping time she turned around. Well, not anymore, pal, Sadie thought, her mouth settling into a grim line.

She didn't need his help. It was time she made that clear. She expected him to abide by their business agreement. A *silent* investor needed to remain silent.

Sadie parked the truck on the street in front of Porters, cut the engine, and hopped out. Locking the door behind her, she used the back entrance leading to the kitchen. It was still mid-morning which meant they had a couple hours before the lunch crowd swarmed.

Pushing the heavy metal door open, she saw Ryleigh standing in the center of the kitchen, giving orders to her two assistants—some local college kids home for the summer. Soon enough, Pemberley would be able to pay them instead of Ryleigh's parents fronting the cost.

Their online shop and the bi-monthly farmer's market had been doing well. They were already turning a nice profit. Once the bed-and-breakfast and the farm tours were up and running, Pemberley stood a good chance of becoming a very promising business endeavor.

And she was tickled pink to be able to help her grandparents save their livelihood and secure her family's legacy.

“Hey, Ry!” Sadie called as she approached.

The prep tables were covered in baking tins of fresh-from-the-oven bread, dinner rolls, cinnamon rolls, assorted cookies, biscuits, and Ryleigh's latest obsession—blueberry scones. "Looks good. You've been quite the busy little bee."

"Sadie!" Ryleigh squealed. "Oh my goodness! Isn't this amazing? We are barely keeping up with the orders! I'm still pinching myself that my culinary creations are selling like hotcakes!"

"Of course they are," Sadie said. "How could you ever doubt your mad skills?" She grabbed one of the white aprons hanging on a hook by the kitchen door. "I'm at your disposal, my liege."

Ryleigh beamed at her. "We finished all of this morning's baking. Now we just need to get everything packaged for deliveries. They'll be shipped out later this afternoon."

"Wonderful," Sadie said. "You really are amazing. I hope you know that none of this would be possible without you."

Ryleigh threw her arms around Sadie's neck. "I'm so thrilled that things are working out the way you hoped they would." She pulled away and held Sadie at arms-length. "Without your idea for Pemberley, I never would have the chance to live out my baking dreams. This is the closest thing to opening my own bakery."

"You will have your own bakery, your own restaurant—heck, anything you want—once we are fully renovated and open for business at the farm," Sadie said with a grin.

“I can hardly wait for the opening!” Emerald eyes shining, Ryleigh had a faraway expression on her face as if she were picturing the future.

The ringing bell on Porters’ front entrance alerted them of a customer’s arrival.

“Oh, Sadie, would you mind getting that? I want to get the workers started on packaging everything. There’s a to-go order and I’m pretty sure that’s her. It’s on the counter beside the register—an assortment of baked goods.” She blew a kiss at Sadie. “You’re a doll!”

Sadie hurried through the swinging door to the front counter. She didn’t mind waiting on customers. She’d worked at Porters part-time through high school alongside Ryleigh so it felt second nature to man the cash register.

A tall woman with her blonde hair twisted into a French knot, wearing an elegant, black business suit, stood behind the cash register, her head bent, peering at her phone.

“Good morning,” Sadie said brightly. “Are you here for the to-go order?”

“Yes,” the woman said briskly, still scrolling through her phone. “And I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

“Of course,” Sadie said, ignoring the customer’s tone. She grabbed the white bakery box with the order receipt. She quickly rang it up and told the woman her total.

The customer glanced up from her phone as she handed Sadie a credit card. She realized it was Jameson’s mother,

Penelope McDaniels.

Sadie could hardly believe her luck. Everywhere she went in this town, it seemed Jameson followed.

“Sadie,” Penelope said, a polite smile on her red lips. “I didn’t know you were working at Porters again.”

“I’m not, ma’am.” Sadie returned her polite smile. “Just helping out.”

“I was sorry to hear about your grandfather,” Penelope went on. “I do hope he’s feeling much better.”

“He is. Thank you, ma’am.”

Penelope clucked her tongue. “To have to deal with a health crisis in the midst of a financial hardship—well, your grandmother is one tough lady.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Sadie gave her a tight smile.

She was reminded once again how much she’d never cared for Jameson’s mother. It was the way she managed to weave contempt into every compliment like a Trojan horse. The McDaniels were the richest family in Fontana, if not the whole state of Kansas. And Penelope McDaniels made sure no one ever forgot that fact. She would smile as she stared down her nose, using her signature patronizing tone as she reminded folks that their station in life would never rise to hers.

Penelope’s thin smile widened a fraction. “Jameson told me all about your little business venture. I think it’s precious the way you’re trying to save your family farm. Of course, when he pitched me all of your ideas for updating Pemberley, I

was so excited for you.” She put her credit card away and then took the bakery box Sadie handed her.

“Have a wonderful day, Mrs. McDaniels,” Sadie said. “Give my best to your family.”

Penelope adjusted the bakery box. “I’m just thrilled to have Pemberley join our collection of promising business partnerships. I see a lot of potential in your little farm. In fact, that’s exactly what I told your grandparents a few months ago when McDaniel Properties offered to buy them out.”

Sadie’s throat went dry. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“With your grandfather’s health issues, I’d imagine running a new business might prove to be too much for them.”

“Yes—well, I plan on sticking around to help out,” Sadie said evenly, all of her earlier pleasantries vanishing.

Penelope smiled. “I do so admire that fighting spirit of yours. But I imagine you’ll eventually want to get back to your life in the big city. What will your grandparents do then?”

And with that, Penelope McDaniels turned on her expensive heels and walked out the front door.

Leaving Sadie alone with her troubling thoughts.

\* \* \*

On Saturday, Sadie drove Grandma Mae’s truck into Kansas City and picked up Carlotta from the airport.

She word-vomited the whole dang story about Jameson and the storm and what Penelope had said about Pemberley. The gory details just spewed out of her like lava.

“Wow,” Carlotta said. “I missed a lot while I was away.”

“Yeah, you did,” Sadie agreed. “But I’m so glad you’re back now. How long do we have you for?”

Carlotta waved one of her French-manicured hands in the air. “You know how these things go...nothing pans out until it does. At the moment, I don’t have anything on deck so I plan on staying as long as I can.”

“Good,” Sadie said, turning the truck’s windshield wipers on to combat the accumulating drizzle. “Now onto my problem with Jameson. What should I do?”

“Well...” She pursed her berry-painted lips together. “I think you need to confront him about what his mother said.”

“You think so?” Sadie said skeptically. “I was hoping I could just brush it off and pretend it never happened.”

“Are we talking about what happened in Porters or what Jameson said during the storm?”

“The storm—both—I don’t know.” Sadie let out a deep sigh. Despite their business arrangement, she’d been hoping she’d never have to see him again.

The thirty-third of Neverary worked perfectly for her.

She’d contemplated taking the coward’s way out—have Ryleigh or Grandma Mae deal with Jameson from now on.



She could just pretend she'd never heard anything Penelope had said about the farm. She'd clearly been out to get her goat but that didn't mean Sadie had to let her.

Whatever it took, she would make sure her grandparents never sold the farm. No matter what Penelope McDaniels said—or did.

“Aren't you the tiniest bit curious to hear what Jameson has to say?” Carlotta tossed her hair over one shoulder. “Because I am.”

“What are you proposing?” Sadie asked hesitantly, afraid to hear her answer.

“Well,” Carlotta said, a wicked smile on her face. “I say you go over to his house—I'm sure Ryleigh knows where he lives—and show up unannounced. Catch him off his game and just flat out ask him about what his mom said.”

“Oh...I don't know if I could do something like that,” Sadie said, shaking her head. “I don't relish the thought of being alone with him at his house.”

“Why not?” Carlotta asked, eyeing Sadie.

“It just makes me uncomfortable.”

“Well, if you don't want to then I'll do it.”

“No—absolutely not!” said Sadie.

“Well, someone has to confront him, Sade. He's a silent partner. We need to know if he's planning on sabotaging our efforts to save the farm.”

Sadie fixed her eyes on the road, saying nothing. Carlotta was right, of course. She was acting childish.

And childish behavior wasn't going to help her save the farm.

She would have to become a shrewd businesswoman. Learn to play Jameson's game—and beat him at it.

“Fine,” Sadie said. “I'll do it.”

She dropped Carlotta off at Ryleigh's place and headed home for a quick dinner with her grandparents. Then, Sadie changed into what she considered professional business attire.

A black blazer with a deep blue satin camisole top, black trousers, and her favorite black kitten heels. After debating with herself about wearing her hair in a bun or loose around her shoulders, she opted for loose. The tight bun reminded her of dancing and she wanted to craft a new persona: Sadie Barnhart—successful business owner. Tiny silver hoop earrings and a simple silver necklace completed the look.

Five minutes later, she slid behind the wheel of the truck, on her way to the address Ryleigh had texted her. She switched the radio on for company, finding the quiet did nothing to soothe her nerves.

Suppose he wasn't home?

Well...then she'd just go over to Ryleigh's and forget about the whole thing—at least for tonight. But what if she couldn't work up the nerve to do this again?

Shaking her head, she decided that was a problem for another day.

She checked the GPS on her phone. She was close to the address. Then a mortifying thought struck her. What if he had a date?

The thought of bursting in on Jameson with some girl was nearly enough to make her turn the truck around and head home.

But she forced herself to keep going.

She wasn't doing this for herself. She was doing this for her grandparents. Saving the farm was all that mattered.

As long as she kept that at the forefront of her mind, she could do this.

The GPS dinged, letting Sadie know she'd reached the turn-off for her destination. Taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, Sadie turned down the long driveway, unsure of what to expect. Ryleigh said Jameson had purchased some land just outside of Fontana and built himself a house. It was so like him to build a spanking-new house on the edge of town just to show off.

But nothing could have prepared Sadie for the house at the end of the long drive.

She brought the truck to a stop, cutting the engine, and just—sat there, feeling stunned, as she took it all in. The dazzling sunset bathed the enormous house in cascading pinks and oranges. The house itself was almost completely made of

glass. Walls and walls of endless glass. And the effect was quite breathtaking.

There was certainly nothing like it in Fontana.

When it dawned on Sadie that Jameson was probably watching her from one of those fancy security systems—because there was no way a house that looked like this wouldn't have one—she opened her door and hopped out. Locking it, she walked hesitantly toward Jameson's front door, wiping damp hands on her thighs and feeling like she was on her way to her own execution or something.

Sadie pressed the doorbell beside the front door and waited. She forced herself to breathe normally, hoping to calm her racing heart.

Why was she coming unglued over Jameson McDaniels?

Sadie told herself it must be because the farm—and everything her grandparents had spent their lives working for—was at stake.

She pressed the button one more time and waited. Maybe he wasn't home even though she'd seen his black BMW parked in the driveway.

Just when she'd all but convinced herself he wasn't there, the door finally swung open and Sadie jumped back, her hand across her chest.

“Sadie,” Jameson said. “Sorry, I hope you weren't waiting too long. I was downstairs.” He was barefoot, wearing faded blue jeans and a fraying, gray KSU t-shirt.

And she suddenly felt way overdressed in her blazer and heels.

Her heartbeat drummed in her ears but Sadie forced herself to smile. “No, I wasn’t waiting long. May I come inside?”

Jameson returned her smile, sweeping his hand toward the foyer. “Of course.”

Sadie stepped across the threshold. Inside, the house was tastefully decorated with cream and ebony accents as if he’d had an interior designer inform his decisions. But it lacked all the coziness of Pemberley.

The air smelled faintly of pine...like a Christmas tree. She assumed it must be an air freshener since she didn’t see a tree anywhere in sight. Though there were a few well-placed house plants dispersed strategically across the open floor plan.

The entire space felt entirely—and overwhelmingly—masculine.

When Jameson offered her a beverage, Sadie declined. Her stomach in knots, she fought the wave of nausea threatening to overtake her.

How could she have let Carlotta talk her into doing something like this?

Jameson led her into the living room and they settled onto an enormous cream couch with black accent pillows. A mammoth screen TV covered the opposite wall. Growing up with Elijah and Grandpa Cliff had taught her that when it came to entertainment systems—the bigger the better.

“So,” Jameson said casually. “What brings you by?”

“Oh, well—I—needed to speak to you about something.” It took her a minute to compose her thoughts. She’d prepared an elaborate speech with Carlotta on the drive back to Fontana. But he’d thrown her off with his big fancy house and impeccable manners. “I think I better stand for this.”

She turned away from him, gathering her wits as she ran through her rehearsed speech. Sadie exhaled slowly before facing him.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, his dark blonde eyebrows knitted together over those impossibly green eyes.

“Yes,” Sadie said evenly. “Something is very wrong. Why did you make loan payments without telling me first?”

“Oh,” Jameson shrugged. “It wasn’t a big deal—”

“It was a very big deal. And I had to wait to find out until I went to the bank? Can you even imagine how I felt? I must’ve looked like such a fool.” She shook her head, disgusted.

“Sadie, it wasn’t like that. Mr. Brooks mentioned the loan had fallen into default when I turned in the paperwork.”

“He also agreed to give us a thirty-day extension.”

“I always planned on telling you,” Jameson said. “I just thought it made sense to start our new business venture out of the red.”

“Not our business venture, Jameson. *My* business venture. Mine and my family’s.” Sadie could feel the rage boiling up as

all the emotions she'd been bottling rushed to the surface. "Is this a game to you?" She took a step toward him, pointing an accusing finger.

He stood, facing her. "Of course this isn't a game. I am genuinely sorry if I overstepped. I was just trying to help."

"You were just trying to help," she spat the words at him. "The same way your mom was just trying to help when she offered to buy the farm from my grandparents?"

"What are you talking about?" Jameson said, a wild look in his green eyes. He brought his face dangerously close to Sadie's.

"I had the nicest little chat with your mom at Porters," Sadie said through clenched teeth. "And she told me all about your family's plan to steal Pemberley!"

Sadie tried to move away but he reached for her arm. "This is the first I've heard about any of this. Believe me, Sadie."

Suddenly, she was well aware of how close they were standing. That boiling pot of rage inside her cooled to a simmer as something else entirely took shape. Something foreign and unexpected pooled in her belly.

The thought itself felt blasphemous and Sadie pushed it away with every last ounce of strength she could muster. "Give me one good reason why I should."

"Because it's the truth," he said softly. "I only want to help you."

“Why?” she whispered, staring into those impossibly green eyes. She felt a rush of heat...like fire burning through her limbs, the flames engulfing her until there was nothing left... and the room...was spinning and spinning. The dizziness made her head swim.

Her heart was pounding, her mouth like sandpaper, while all of her senses heightened inexplicably. No, no, no...this could *not* be happening right now.

She needed to pull her damn self together. Right this instant. But the more her mind tried to fight this new sensation burning through her, the more her body involuntarily responded to his...entirely too-close proximity.

Sadie took a deliberate step backward, away from him, bringing a hand in front of her, fingers splayed outward, as if she could somehow ward herself from how he was making her feel.

But the way he was staring at her right now, it sent fire down her spine, made her stomach flutter like some besotted teenager. And the notion absolutely disgusted her.

Weak—that’s what she was. A weak, spineless woman... letting him get to her like this.

Slowly, so painstakingly slow, he stepped toward her.

Sadie’s breath caught in her throat as she struggled to keep her composure. But this—this stupid, magnetic, gravitational thing between them just kept tugging her forward. To him.



“Why do you even care?” she finally managed to croak out, barely a hair’s breadth between them.

“Because ever since that day you drove back into town...I haven’t been able to get you off my mind.”

Sadie’s mouth fell open. “You—you—what?” Such a potent, overwhelming sensibility swept through Sadie. Her body froze as her mind whirled out of control. Too much. It was all too much. And she was tired, so very tired of fighting—everything. Everyone. Him.

She was starting to crack from all the pressure she was under. And it was making it difficult to think clearly. That had to be it, she decided.

Because there was no way Jameson McDaniels—her despised childhood nemesis, the former star high school quarterback, and Fontana’s golden boy—had just said he couldn’t stop thinking about her.

“Let me make things a little more clear.” In a flash, Jameson’s hands were in Sadie’s hair and he took her mouth with his.

Initial shock melted into treacherous compliance as her body refused to move.

And just when Sadie thought things couldn’t possibly get any worse, she started kissing him back.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Sadie sat at her usual table at Porters having a late breakfast with Carlotta and Ryleigh. She was still struggling to process her emotions after last night's alarming encounter.

“So,” Carlotta said, cradling her coffee cup in both hands, “I think we’re going to need to hear all the gory details about what happened.” She made eyes at Ryleigh.

“Did you find out anything from Jameson about Penelope’s involvement?” Ryleigh leaned forward, planting her elbows on the table.

Sadie purposely stabbed a forkful of pancake, drenched in maple syrup, and shoveled it into her mouth. She took a sip of coffee as her friends stared at her expectantly. Swallowing hard, she realized it was futile to resist their questions.

What was the point? They’d get it out of her soon enough.

“Well?” Carlotta said, exasperated.

“I went over there like we planned and I delivered my speech just like I rehearsed.” Sadie took another sip of coffee. “And...”

“And, what?” Carlotta pressed, arching her perfect eyebrows.

“I don’t think I can say it out loud.”

“She doesn’t have to tell us if she doesn’t want to.” Ryleigh gave Sadie a sympathetic smile.

“That’s hogwash,” Carlotta said. She leaned back in her chair, folding her arms. “I guess we could just call Jameson and get the story from him.” She smiled mischievously.

“Some friends you are,” Sadie grumbled, shaking her head.

Why did the topic of Jameson McDaniels always leave her feeling so irritable? And why in the blazes couldn’t she just stop thinking about him altogether? These new, overpowering, out-of-control feelings were so...so frustrating. It was like she was being double-crossed by her own body.

“Ry, do you recall ever seeing her this worked up over a guy?” Carlotta asked sweetly.

“No,” Ryleigh said softly, her face turning crimson as she stared down at her plate.

“It’s good to know my best friends always have my back.”

“Oh stop being so dramatic,” Carlotta said, flipping her long hair over one shoulder. “Just tell us what happened and we’ll stop bugging you.”

Sadie let out an exasperated sigh. “Fine. Anything to get you off my back. So...the thing is...we kind of...ended up...kissing.”

Ryleigh and Carlotta both started talking at once and Sadie had a hard time deciphering what they were saying. She held up both hands. “It was just one measly little kiss. Really, it was \_\_\_”

“Nothing?” Carlotta finished. “I mean that is what you were going to say, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Sadie said, jutting her chin out. “Exactly. We don’t have to make a thing out of it. Because it’s not a thing.”

Carlotta leaned forward. “A kiss is always a thing. Especially when it’s you who’s doing the kissing.”

She was still trying to wrap her head around it herself. She’d been up most of the night anguishing over it. How could she have kissed him like that? What had she even been thinking? Talk about colossal mistakes of epic proportions. She just—wanted to forget the whole thing had ever happened. Fat chance of that, though, with her best friends giving her the third degree.

Ryleigh stared at her hands, listening. She hated confrontation and couldn’t stand it when they fought. “There’s nothing wrong with you kissing Jameson. You’re both adults and it’s your own business.” She gave Carlotta a warning look. “You’re not obligated to tell us anything.”

Carlotta sighed, holding up both hands in surrender. “Fine. I won’t pressure you to talk about it if you don’t want to but…” Her voice trailed off as she shook her head.

“But what?” Sadie asked

“Sooner or later, you’re going to have to see Jameson and you’ll have to deal with the kiss. I’m assuming he kissed you since making the first move isn’t really your style.”

“It’s definitely not,” Sadie muttered, lifting her coffee cup to her lips and taking a long drink. She’d always been a little on the timid side when it came to dating. Sure, she’d go out on

the occasional date but it was never anything serious—nothing that would distract her from dancing.

“Actually, it’s my style.” Carlotta winked at Sadie. “But, at some point, Jameson’s going to bring it up. He’ll either play it cool, say the kiss was meaningless—which is bullshit by the way—or he’s going to ask you out again.”

“Oh, God,” Sadie wailed, rubbing her temples with her fingertips. This conversation was starting to give her a headache.

“Would that be so bad?” Ryleigh asked. “I know you disliked him in high school but...I knew him a little in college. He really changed after his back injury. He’s worked hard to become a better person, in my opinion.”

“You always see the best in people, Ry. I’m just not like that,” Sadie said.

“So why did you kiss him back, then?” Carlotta asked, eyeing her skeptically.

“I don’t know, okay? I laid awake most of the night, asking myself the same question.” Sadie pushed her plate away, no longer in the mood for pancakes. “It’s...complicated. I can acknowledge that Jameson has been...different since I came back home. He seems to have changed for the better.”

“So why not give him a chance?” Ryleigh said. “Just forget the past. He was a stupid jerk in high school, I know—”

“Exactly my point,” Sadie said. “How could I ever trust him after how he behaved back then?”

“You don’t have to marry him,” Carlotta said. “But don’t you think you deserve to have a little fun for a change?”

Sadie couldn’t blame her friends for their reaction. After all, she’d never told them about the awful thing he’d done to her in high school. She’d been too humiliated.

But how could Sadie ever forget?

“A fling with Jameson McDaniels would not be fun. It would be incredibly complicated since he is Pemberley’s silent investor.”

“Stop making excuses.” Carlotta waved a hand at Sadie. “You’re going to sit there and pretend like you’ve never noticed how yummy he is?”

Sadie shook her head, feeling irritated. “I swear, why does everyone have to fawn over him like he’s Fontana royalty?”

“Because he’s insanely hot and rich?” Carlotta shrugged. “I mean—that’d be my guess.”

“Okay, fine. I can admit that Jameson is—physically attractive. There. Are you happy now?”

“So why not just go with it?” Carlotta lived for drama. So it came as no surprise she wanted Sadie to throw caution to the wind and dive into some reckless entanglement with Jameson.

“It’s a bad idea, okay. Besides, I haven’t even decided what I’m going to do about Chicago and I have to let Natalia know by the end of the month. I can’t afford to have any distractions. I need to focus on Pemberley.”

“Then you’ve made your decision,” Ryleigh said. “And we can respect that. Can’t we, Car?”

“Sure. Fine. But I think you’re overlooking the real problem.” Carlotta examined her manicure for an imaginary flaw.

“And what is that, pray tell?”

Carlotta stared Sadie dead in the eye. “You already ended up kissing him once...what’s to keep it from happening again?”

# Chapter Six



**J**AMESON KNOCKED ON the open kitchen door in the back of the main house at Pemberley.

And even from outside, whatever Mrs. Barnhart was cooking smelled like heaven. She came to the screen door and motioned him into the kitchen with a welcoming smile. Mabeline Barnhart had always struck Jameson as an extraordinary person. So warm. And unfailingly kind.

Sadie was a lot like her.

“Well, if it isn’t Jameson McDaniels. What brings you out today? Looking for Sadie?” She had the same blue eyes as Sadie and right now they were sparkling with mischief—like she knew a secret.

“Yes, ma’am, I was.”

“Please, call me Grandma Mae—all the kids do.” She moved to the stove and stirred a big silver pot with a wooden spoon. “You hungry? I’m making a fresh pot of my grandmother’s award-winning, three-bean chili. It’s my Clifford’s favorite. Can I fix you a bowl?”

Jameson smiled. He’d never exchanged more than the usual pleasantries in town with Mrs. Barnhart before that morning. But he’d always liked her. Now, he saw he’d barely



scratched the surface of this lovely and thoughtful woman. Not even five minutes into him unexpectedly showing up at her doorstep and she was already treating him like an old friend.

Maybe that was her way. But it sure meant a hell of a lot to Jameson.

“It smells amazing. But I’m going to have to say no. I’m on my way to one of our construction sites. I only stopped by to speak to Sadie for a minute. Is she home?”

“She’s making the rounds on the farm but I think she should be about done. My guess is you’d find her in the barn. She usually saves the cows for last.”

“Thanks, Grandma Mae. It’s been a pleasure. And I promise I’ll take you up on your offer another time.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” She tilted her head to the side as she stared up at him, wiping her hands on the blue checkered apron she wore. “Are you planning on making a play for my girl?”

She caught him off-guard and he stumbled to come up with a reply. “Well—yes, ma’am, I think I am. Would that be a problem?”

“Not for me. But I’m not the one you have to win over.” She smiled, giving a slight shake of her head. “I’m afraid my Sadie won’t make it easy for you. My advice is to be patient.”

He smiled, feeling touched that she would share inside information with him. “I can do that. Got any other tips?”

“The ballet.”

“Excuse me?” Now he was the one cocking his head to the side.

“Sadie loves the ballet. *Swan Lake*’s her favorite. If you want to sweep her off her feet that’d be a great place to start.”

\* \* \*

Jameson made his way out to the barn just like Grandma Mae had suggested.

He loved how close the Barnharts were and the way that Pemberley felt like a real home. It was so different from what Jameson’s life had been like growing up.

Sure, his family’s wealth meant he’d never wanted for anything. Except his parents’ love and attention. It was such a cliché. And sometimes he felt ashamed of it—but it was still the truth. He’d grown up as the poor, little rich boy all alone in the big, ivory tower.

How many days had he spent in that huge, empty house with Constance, their housekeeper, as his only companion?

Too many to count.

In many ways, he’d felt closer to Constance than his own mother. She’d been the one to dry his tears when he’d fallen and scraped his knee—not his actual mother.

There’d always been some charity fundraiser, or some gala that needed her on their planning committee, or some important business trip where she needed to schmooze rich clients alongside Jameson’s father.

And all of it had been more important than Jameson.

When Sadie told him what his mother had said—it hadn't been much of a surprise. It was exactly what Jameson would expect of her. Pouncing on the Barnharts when they were at their most vulnerable—well, he'd be damned if he let her have her way.

Pemberley Farm was *his* business venture.

He'd worked hard to earn Sadie's trust. And he had every intention of living up to his promises.

Even if it meant standing in the way of his mother's desires.

The doors to the auxiliary barn were slightly ajar so Jameson carefully pushed them open. Sadie sat on a small wooden stool, milking one of the cows.

Jameson cleared his throat and she practically fell off her stool. "I didn't mean to startle you. Your grandmother told me I might find you out here."

"I see." Her tone was stoic as her eyes remained fixed on the cow. "Did you need something?"

"I wanted to apologize—for last night." He inched closer but still kept his distance, sensing she needed her space. "You ran out before I could say anything. I—I shouldn't have kissed you like that. I'm sorry, Sadie."

Sadie stood, wiping her hands on the faded jeans she wore. She looked up at him as if she were trying to gauge the

sincerity in his words. “I accept your apology,” she said finally.

She looked relieved. Probably anxious to scoot him back under the business-only category in her mind. But he had no intention of letting her do that. Because she could stand there in all her righteous self-control but it wouldn’t change the fact that she’d kissed him back last night.

She’d kissed him and when they’d finally pulled apart, the surprise in her eyes told Jameson she was just as startled by her behavior as she was by his kiss.

“And I’ll speak to my mother about what she said. You don’t have to worry about her interfering with your plans for Pemberley. This is our project and she has nothing to do with it.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“Of course,” he said. “I’m just sorry she upset you. She likes stirring up trouble. I think she lives for the drama.”

“I plan on paying you back—for the loan payments.”

He held up a hand. “That’s not necessary—”

“I want to pay you back,” she said forcefully.

“Okay,” he said. “If that’s what you want.”

“That’s what I want,” she said evenly, running her hand over the cow’s fur.

He stared at Sadie, thinking of all the ways what he was about to say might blow up in his face.

Deciding it was worth the risk, he said, “Let me make it up to you. As a concession for my mother’s behavior and mine, I’d like to take you out...to apologize.”

Sadie briefly closed her eyes and let out a sigh. “You’ve already apologized. ”

“I’d still like to have the chance to make it up to you.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. I wouldn’t want to give you the wrong impression.”

He rubbed his lips together, amused by her choice of words. “And what kind of impression do you want to give me?”

“That this is a business arrangement, Jameson. Period.”

He took a small step toward her, still maintaining his distance. The last thing he wanted to do was scare her off. “Then why did you kiss me back?” he asked softly. He enjoyed watching her cheeks flush.

Sadie opened her mouth and quickly closed it. The way she always tried to keep control over herself—God, he admired that.

“Look, here’s my proposal. One date. That’s it. One outing to a public place and I’ll completely back off afterwards...if you want me to.”

“One date,” she repeated slowly. “Then you promise you’ll drop the subject completely, including the flirty undertones you manage to fit into every conversation?”

He held up his hand, smiling at her word choice. “I solemnly swear to it.”

She let out a heavy sigh. “Okay. One date.”

\* \* \*

“I brought two dresses,” Ryleigh said, holding them up by the hangers for Sadie to see. “I couldn’t decide which one I liked best for a first date.”

“No,” Sadie said sharply, holding up a finger. “This is not a first date. It’s a one-time-only date.”

She’d asked Ryleigh to bring over something for her to wear on her date. But now she was afraid she might regret that decision.

Most of her wardrobe was still at her apartment in Chicago and she hadn’t wanted to buy something new. Well-versed in the repercussions of small-town living, she couldn’t risk purchasing a new dress in Fontana and having it get back to Jameson.

His ego was already inflated enough as it was.

Ryleigh carefully laid both dresses on Sadie’s bed, fluffing them out to keep the wrinkles at bay. “Where is he taking you again?”

Sadie shrugged. “All he would tell me is it’s someplace nice. I thought maybe out to dinner but I’m not sure.”

Ryleigh clapped her hands. “I can’t wait to hear every detail. Feel free to call me as soon as he drops you off

tonight.”

“Ry, it’s not *that* exciting...it’s just dinner, probably. Let’s not make it a thing.”

“Is that why you’re keeping it a secret from Carlotta?”

“I’ll tell her—eventually, when tonight is in the rearview mirror and she can finally stop bugging me about it. I just don’t want her to know right now, okay?”

Ryleigh patted her hand. “I promise I won’t say anything. It’s your choice and I support whatever you decide.” She stood, hands on her hips, looking at the dresses. “I think I like the pink one best. It will go great with your complexion.”

Sadie picked up the pink dress and, holding it in front of her, went to the full-length mirror, examining it further. The dress was a pink satin material with a lace overlay. “I don’t know, Ryleigh. I think this one looks like I’m trying too hard. It’s really fancy. Let me see the other one.”

Ryleigh took the pink dress from Sadie, laid it back on the bed, and picked up the green dress with the pink and white flowers.

Sadie held it up to her face in the mirror, tilting her head as she considered it. “I think this is the one. It’s a simple, spring dress. Appropriate for the weather and it looks like something I’d have in my closet. Not too fussy.”

“I agree,” Ryleigh said. “Plus, it’s off the shoulder which will look great for a first—I mean—a date. A little flirty—but not too much. And I love the ruffles along the edge.”

“Okay, this is the one. Now, shoes?”

Ryleigh went to Sadie’s closet and held up a pair of sandals. “I think your white strappy sandals will work nicely.”

“What about my hair?” Sadie examined herself in the mirror.

“Definitely down,” Ryleigh said. “It’s a date, not a job interview.”

“Oh, if only it could be an interview,” Sadie said, staring at her reflection. “Wouldn’t that be simpler?”

Ryleigh pulled Sadie into a hug. “I love you,” she said. “Give him a chance. Maybe he’ll surprise you.” She pulled away and looked up at Sadie, green eyes shining. “No one deserves to be happy more than you.”

“I love you, too,” Sadie said. “Well, I guess I should start getting ready. It’s getting late and I need to hop in the shower.”

“Have fun,” Ryleigh called, as she walked to the door. “Call me later with the details.”

Just one date, Sadie told herself as she sank onto her bed, finally alone with her thoughts. She would get this over with and then they’d never speak about it again.

At least, that’s what Sadie hoped would happen.

But a few hours later, Sadie was showered, dressed, and pacing back and forth, wondering if she’d made a huge mistake.



What had she been thinking to agree to go on a date with Jameson McDaniels?

Kissing him had been bad enough.

But now she was supposed to spend an entire evening with him?

Dealing with all the stress of getting their farm venture off the ground had made her go temporarily insane. That had to be it.

Well, the damage was done now. No point in wallowing.

She couldn't back out at the last minute without damaging their business partnership. So for the sake of the farm—and her grandparents—she would just have to suck it up and do the damn thing.

How bad could it be?

One night out—a couple of meaningless hours. It seemed a small concession in the grand scheme of things. Even if it meant swallowing her anger toward Jameson.

She could do that for one night, couldn't she?

A knock at Sadie's bedroom door interrupted her jumbled thoughts. Grandma Mae popped her head inside. "You have a visitor in the kitchen."

Swallowing hard, Sadie smiled at her grandmother. "Thanks, I'll be right there." She checked her reflection in the mirror one last time and grabbed Ryleigh's clutch purse from the dresser then took a deep, calming breath.

When she entered the kitchen, her grandmother was seated at the table, snapping green beans in half for dinner. Grandma Mae smiled at Sadie. “Here she is. You two kids have a good time now.”

“Yes ma’am,” Jameson said.

Sadie finally let her gaze fall on her date for the evening.

Jameson wore a crisp white shirt, unbuttoned at the neck, and an expensive-looking, well-tailored charcoal gray suit with black loafers. He held a bouquet of pink and white roses which just so happened to be Sadie’s favorite.

She had a sneaking suspicion Ryleigh had something to do with his choice of flowers.

“Hi.” He smiled at Sadie. “These are for you.” He stepped forward, handing her the bouquet.

She stared at him, still a little stunned by his kind gesture. “Uh—thank you,” she said, good breeding overtaking her. Sadie turned to Grandma Mae. “Would you mind—”

“My, what pretty flowers.” Grandma Mae took the flowers Sadie held out. “I’ll just put these in some water. What a thoughtful thing to do, isn’t it, Sadie?”

She offered him a polite smile. “Yes, it is thoughtful.”

A little *too* thoughtful. Or maybe calculated was a better word for it.

“Shall we head out?” he asked her.

After saying goodbye to her grandmother, she followed Jameson out the back door he held open.

“You look beautiful, by the way,” Jameson said, his green eyes catching the evening sun’s fiery glow.

“You too—I mean, you look nice,” she added quickly, feeling a little flustered.

Why was she so nervous? She took a calming breath, attempted to regain her composure.

Only for one night, Sadie reminded herself. A person could do almost anything for a few hours, right?

A black limousine was idling at the end of the driveway.

“Is that for us?”

“Yeah,” Jameson said. “I thought it would be a nice touch.” He nodded at the limo driver who walked to the passenger door and held it open as Jameson gestured toward the interior. “After you.”

Holding the skirt of her dress down, Sadie scooted across the enormous black leather seat and Jameson followed suit.

After the limo driver shut the door, Sadie turned to Jameson with what she hoped was a polite smile. “Exactly where are you taking me?”

“I have it on good authority that you’re a fan of the Kansas City Ballet,” Jameson said, crossing his long legs in front of him as he leaned back into the leather seat cushion.

“You’re taking me to the ballet?” she asked, feeling a little awestruck. She never in a million years would’ve expected something like this from him. It was so incredibly... thoughtful.

“There’s a performance of *Swan Lake* tonight and I managed to snag two front-row seats. The wife of a client of mine serves on the board. I might’ve heard that you’re a big fan of that particular ballet.” He stroked his chiseled jawline with his thumb as he eyed Sadie.

The limo pulled out of the long driveway onto the main road.

“Yeah,” she said softly, looking down at her hands folded in her lap. “It’s my favorite.”

“That’s what my spies tell me.”

“Your spies? Anyone I know?”

“It’s possible,” Jameson said. “But I could never reveal my sources. It would be a betrayal of trust.”

“Oh, is that right?” Sadie laughed. Now that her nerves had settled a bit, surprisingly, she was actually having an okay time.

And maybe, just maybe, this wouldn’t be the unpleasant evening she’d imagined.

He reached into a silver bucket filled with ice and pulled out a bottle of champagne. “I thought it might be nice to have some refreshments on our way there.” He grabbed the set of tall, flute glasses beside the bucket. And after uncorking the

bottle, Jameson poured each of them a glass and handed one to Sadie.

The bubbles tickled her nose as she brought the glass to her lips and took a small sip of the cool velvety liquid. “This is good.”

“I’m glad you like it. Are you hungry?”

“I am, actually.” Farm chores had monopolized most of the day and Sadie hadn’t eaten much since breakfast.

Jameson leaned forward and opened the compact refrigerator built into the limo. He pulled out a silver tray and set it on the small table beside the ice bucket. It was filled with red grapes, apple slices, cheese, bread, and cold cuts. On top of the refrigerator was a compartment that held plates and silverware. Withdrawing a plate, he handed one to Sadie. “Here. Help yourself.”

Sadie filled her plate with a sampling of everything. Popping a grape into her mouth, she studied Jameson while he filled his own.

It was getting harder and harder to make herself remember how much she hated him. All that anger she’d been carrying around for so long seemed to be evaporating. And she had no idea how to hold onto it.

That was the thought that frightened her the most.

Because without her righteous anger, she felt completely vulnerable to his undeniable charms. And to the alarming effect they seemed to be having on her.

They ate in comfortable silence for a while and Sadie was grateful for the absence of conversation. It gave her time to get herself under control.

“So is ballet your favorite form of dance?” Jameson wiped his mouth with a napkin as he waited for her reply.

“It was when I was little.” Sadie sipped her champagne. “*Swan Lake* was the first ballet I ever saw. My mom took me when I was six years old and I thought it was the most magical thing I’d ever seen. I remember leaning forward in my seat the whole time, completely mesmerized. I swore that one day I’d be one of those graceful ballerinas.”

“Do you cherish it even more because you got to experience it for the first time with your mom?”

“Yeah.” Sadie smiled wistfully. “I suppose it’s still my favorite ballet because I get to keep her memory with me every time I see it. I can always picture her in the seat next to mine, getting a big kick out of my reaction.”

“How old were you when she died?” Jameson asked quietly.

“I was ten. It was a car accident. There was a drunk driver. She and my father were killed instantly.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jameson said. “I can only imagine how hard that must’ve been.”

“It was...very hard on me and Elijah. But my grandparents were incredible. We moved here and started a new life. It still hurts sometimes but not as much as it used to.”

It was funny how almost twenty years had passed and she could still recall certain things clear as a bell in her mind. Like how safe and loved she'd always felt when her mom would tuck her into bed at night after reading another chapter of *Alice in Wonderland*—her favorite book when she was seven. Or how her dad would wrap her in his big strong arms during a frightening thunderstorm when she was small. He'd whisper there was nothing to worry about and she'd feel instantly better.

“Thank you for sharing that with me,” Jameson said quietly. He reached for her free hand and squeezed it gently.

Sadie cleared her throat. She wasn't sure why she'd told him about her parents. His hand was warm and it felt nice wrapped around hers. The thought sent a tremor of fear through her. Because she didn't quite know how to stop what was happening between them. And more frightening still, she wasn't sure if she could stop it at all.

She pulled away from him almost reluctantly. “Enough about me. What about you?”

“What about me?” Jameson said with a smile.

“What do you like to do? What are you passionate about?” She bit into an apple slice.

“Oh—well, when I'm not taking beautiful women to the ballet,” he said, giving her a lopsided grin, “I enjoy discovering unique business opportunities. And when I'm not doing that, I like watching the Chiefs play.”

“Football,” Sadie said, nodding. “You were the high school quarterback so that makes sense.”

“Yeah, I had dreams of making it into the NFL but after my back injury in college...it was a nonstarter.” He sipped his champagne. “Took me a while to get over the disappointment. But I pulled myself together, worked hard, and found something else I enjoy. Besides, there’s a shelf-life to being a pro-athlete and it’s an enormous commitment. I think things worked out for the best in the end.”

“I don’t know if I could be as mature about it as you’ve been. The thought of not being able to dance—well, I don’t know if I could handle it.” She bit into her baguette, thinking of their sordid past. Strangely, right now, with Jameson beside her, it didn’t sting as much as it usually did.

“Can I ask you something?”

Sadie shrugged. “I guess. What do you want to know?”

“Why did you hate me so much when you first came to town?”

“Oh—wow. That’s a big question, Jameson.”

She took a long swig of champagne to soothe the awakening storm of emotions stirring within.

“Look, I just want to clear the air,” he said. “If I’ve done something to upset you then I’d like to apologize for it.”

She gave him a sidelong glance. “You really have no clue do you?”



It should have made her furious that he didn't know what he'd put her through.

But for some confounding reason, it didn't.

Sadie told herself it must be the champagne.

It had completely disarmed her.

In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so relaxed.

Sadie weighed his request as she studied his face. His annoyingly handsome face.

Seemed less annoying tonight, though.

And he seemed sincere in his attempt to—how had he put it?—clear the air.

“Please, just tell me what it is so we can finally put it behind us.”

Sadie took a deep breath, letting it seep out. “You sure you want to do this?”

“Yeah—I am.” Those deep green eyes pleaded with her.

She could drown in them—if she let herself.

Sadie cleared her throat. “Do you remember the afternoon before the big homecoming game our senior year?”

I remember,” Jameson said, nodding.

“Do you remember the senior prank that the football team pulled off that year?”

He smiled as if remembering and Sadie's stomach lurched. She took another sip of champagne. Watching him act so cavalier about it, that familiar fire returned and it took all her strength not to throw her drink in his face.

“The blue paint in the main hallway by the trophy case? I remember Principal Hillmore freaking out and we had to help the custodian clean the floors for the next month. But what does that have to do with us?”

“I don't know if I can talk about it.” Sadie closed her eyes, pressing her fingertips to her eyelids. Her head began to throb. Probably from all the champagne.

“Please, tell me.”

The shades of nostalgic fondness no longer colored his tone, she noted.

At least that was something.

“I was there,” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

“You were where?” Jameson asked.

She took another deep breath. Her seventeen-year-old self lying in a heap on the freshly-painted linoleum flashed through her mind. That familiar burning rage tinged with fear and helplessness fought to resurface. “We'd just finished pep squad practice. The building was empty but I'd forgotten my math book and I had to run back inside to get it.”

“Oh my god,” he whispered. “You came back inside...and the floor was wet.”

She didn't dare look at him. Not now. Talking about it was painful enough but looking at him while she recounted one of the worst moments in her life—that was more than she could handle. “I turned down the corner toward my locker. I didn't see the paint...I fell...came down hard on my ankle. It was twisted underneath me—badly sprained. But thank God, it wasn't broken.”

He sat beside her, just listening.

She was grateful for that.

“I had an audition for the School of American Ballet a few weeks later. I'd been practicing for months. The doctor didn't think my ankle would be strong enough to dance but I was too stubborn to listen. If I missed my audition, it would be a whole year before I could audition again. And as you might've guessed, I botched it. My ankle wasn't strong enough. It really shook my confidence. I never got the courage to audition for my dream school again. I went to ISU instead—my backup. Majored in dance. And the rest is history.”

Jameson didn't say anything at first, as if he was still absorbing her words. “Our stupid prank messed up your chance to go to your dream school?” He said it like he was trying to wrap his head around the idea.

“Yeah,” she said simply.

After all this time, it still hurt saying it aloud. She tried to swallow the enormous lump in her throat.

“Sadie...I am so incredibly sorry that happened to you. I was such a stupid knucklehead kid back then. It doesn't excuse my behavior but it's the truth. I was a stupid, thoughtless knucklehead.”

“You were in the hallway after it happened,” she said, finally turning to face him.

He looked stricken. “You saw me?”

“You were laughing with your friends while I laid on the floor, covered in blue paint.”

“I don't know what to say...I—I don't remember seeing anyone in the hallway. Jesus.” He raked a hand through his hair.

“That's no excuse,” Sadie said, shaking her head.

“No,” he said regretfully. “There's no excuse for behaving the way I did. I'm sick to my stomach just thinking about it. God, Sadie, I—I swear, I didn't see you there. You have to believe me.”

“I saw you. How could you not see me?”

“I know there's no way to make up for the past...but, please...give me the chance to prove to you that I've changed.”

She stared at the pretty flowers on her dress, brushing her fingertips over the soft, yielding fabric. “I—I don't know if I can do that.” It felt like the most honest thing she'd said all night.

“Look, I meant what I said before. After tonight, if you don’t ever want to see me outside of our business arrangement then you have my word I’ll respect that boundary.”

Sadie brought her eyes to his face. His bright, green eyes stared back at her in earnest. “Well, I’m here now. So let’s just enjoy tonight.” Her words seemed to reassure him.

“Tonight.” Jameson nodded, his lips curving.

Thirty minutes later, they were seated in the front row, awaiting the opening of The Kansas City Ballet. And as the red velvet curtains raised and revealed the elaborate scenery, Sadie felt giddy with anticipation.

She was her six-year-old self again, grinning from ear to ear as she leaned forward in her seat.

Delicate ballerinas hit their marks. Ethereal bodies bathed in blinding lights as they floated across the stage. And it was the happiest she’d felt in weeks. Like a dark cloud parting to reveal a ray of sunlight. Sadie supposed she had Jameson to thank for that.

Which left her feeling conflicted. Maybe...her former nemesis was more complex than she’d given him credit for.

And perhaps he wasn’t the villain she’d always believed him to be.

Hours later, long after the velvet curtain fell and the audience applause had died, Sadie nestled her head against the limo’s leather seat, struggling to keep her eyes open as they pulled

into Pemberley's winding drive. A drizzle had started to fall and the conversation had slowed to an agreeable silence.

When they stopped in front of the main house, Jameson hopped out and extended his hand toward Sadie. Still feeling a little dazed and happily drowsy, she let him help her out of the car.

"I had a great time tonight, Sadie," Jameson said. "Thank you for coming out with me."

"I had fun, too," Sadie said.

It was the truth—as much as she hated to admit it to herself.

"Good night, then." Jameson leaned in slowly—so slowly that Sadie's breathing hitched. His lips grazed her cheek, a light butterfly kiss. A delicate caress that left her skin tingling .

She watched him climb back into the limo, struck by the unthinkable.

Her opinion of Jameson McDaniels was—to her dismay—evolving.

No longer was he the reckless boy who'd peppered her youth. That much was clear from all of their interactions since she'd come home.

More terrifying still, Sadie feared she might be beginning to actually like him.

# Chapter Seven



**A** WEEK LATER, Ryleigh hosted girls' night at her quaint, two-bedroom apartment—a walk up above the only floral shop in town.

Owned by the kindly Mrs. Madison, a stout widow in her mid-sixties with inky-black hair, courtesy of Ms. Clairol. The place was an enchanting blend of vintage and contemporary, a perfect reflection of Ryleigh's vibrant spirit.

The rooms were wall-papered in a dizzying pattern of florals that seemed like a nod to a bygone era. A fitting boudoir for a Sixties beauty queen. Ryleigh had fallen in love with the space and painstakingly selected a colorful combo of retro and new furnishings to complement what she referred to as the happiest walls in Fontana.

Despite the overwhelming kaleidoscopic array, it always felt like home to Sadie. She supposed that had more to do with Ryleigh than the apartment itself. That girl could make an igloo feel like Santa's cottage at the North Pole.

Sadie desperately needed the familiar comfort of her two oldest friends. The past seven days had been a confusing, headache-inducing whirlwind.

After their date on Friday, Sadie assumed she wouldn't hear from Jameson for at least a few days, as dictated by the guy code of post-date aloofness. But he'd thrown her for another loop when he'd called the next afternoon and invited her over to his house for a home-cooked Sunday night meal.

She'd declined—politely. But with surprising reluctance.

Then, on Wednesday morning, she'd met him at Porters for a business meeting that had evolved into a two-hour brunch filled with lingering gazes—on both their parts—and lively conversation. She'd enjoyed herself again more than she cared to admit.

And Sadie caught herself smiling at odd moments throughout the week for no particular reason she could pinpoint.

The strange, new effect he had on her was maddening! This startling, overwhelming sensation that left her feeling completely disarmed. Made her stomach flutter involuntarily and brought a rush of heat to her face.

She hated how it made her feel so out-of-control...and so exposed.

And Sadie was still grappling with how to reign herself back in.

Carlotta stood at the tiny kitchen island, chopping scallions on the cutting board with rhythmic fervor while Sadie swirled her glass of red wine, mulling over her predicament.



After pointedly clearing her throat, the raven-haired beauty leveled her eyes at Sadie. “So why am I just now hearing that you’ve been seeing Jameson for the past week?”

“I’m not *seeing* Jameson.”

Carlotta narrowed her eyes. She wasn’t getting off the hook that easy.

“I’m sorry! Okay...I just didn’t want to make a big thing of it. And I knew you would.” Sadie’s words tumbled out in a guilt-singed jumble.

“But you could make a thing if it with Ryleigh?” The knife flew across the cutting board as Carlotta unleashed her seeming displeasure.

“I had every intention of telling you, Car. I swear.” Sadie glanced over at Ryleigh for help but she stood, stoic, in front of the stove as she stirred the meat sauce. “What can I do to make it up to you?”

Carlotta used her knife to scrape the scallions into the big salad bowl Sadie was tossing with two wooden spatulas. She avoided Sadie’s gaze. “You can promise to not keep something like that from me in the future.” Her deep, brown eyes fell on Sadie. “That’s not what best friends do.”

“You’re right—you’re absolutely right,” Sadie conceded. “And I feel terrible about it.”

It wasn’t a lie. She’d had a relentless knot in her stomach ever since her date. Because something was happening inside her that she couldn’t control. Something she wasn’t altogether

okay with. Somewhere along the way she'd developed feelings for Jameson. And having the hots for her childhood nemesis was *not* a good idea.

It felt like diving head-first into a dark, bottomless ocean that would surely drown her.

“This has all just—been a lot with Jameson...and Grandpa Cliff...and trying to save Pemberley. But I shouldn't have kept it from you.” Sadie sighed, rubbing her temples. “Am I forgiven?”

Carlotta's face softened into a hint of a smile. Sadie took it as a good omen. “So long as you catch me up on everything I've missed.”

Sadie shot her a relieved smile. “Gladly.”

She launched into a detailed rehash of her first date with Jameson.

Carlotta couldn't help but add, “Wow, I never pegged Jameson as the romantic type. But he's clearly smitten.”

The mere mention of Jameson sent a warm flush to Sadie's cheeks. She hoped Carlotta wouldn't notice. “I had a nice time but we don't need—”

“To make it a thing?” Carlotta added, arching an eyebrow.

“Exactly,” Sadie said.

The timer buzzed and Sadie grabbed a potholder to pull the cheesy garlic bread from the oven.

“It’s all so romantic,” Ryleigh gushed as she turned off the burner under the sauce and grabbed the pasta to drain at the sink. “Why not just enjoy yourself?”

It was an old refrain—one she’d grown tired of hearing. And for the record, she wasn’t enjoying herself.

The whole situation was making her miserable.

Honestly, she wished she’d never run into Jameson in the first place. Even if it meant she had to find some other way to save Pemberley.

Sadie set out plates and silverware on the kitchen table—a creamy marbled tabletop surrounded by a quartet of dusty rose chairs—while Carlotta lit the two antique candlesticks on either side of the glass vase filled with colorful daisies. As Ryleigh plated the spaghetti, Sadie volunteered to retrieve the garlic bread and salad.

Carlotta topped off her glass with the savory Merlot. “Let girls’ night commence,” she said, taking a sip.

“I have some news,” Sadie said, adding a piece of garlic bread to her plate.

“Besides your new boyfriend?” Carlotta asked, twirling spaghetti around her fork.

“Yes. And he’s not my boyfriend.”

“Tell us your news,” Ryleigh said encouragingly.

“Well...for the time being...I’ve decided to remain in Fontana.” Her eyes swept over them as she sipped her wine.

“Really?” Ryleigh shrieked. “That’s so great!”

“I called Natalia today and let her know. She has a friend all set to move in and take my place. I told her to just keep the furniture. She’s going to ship my stuff to me.” Sadie grinned.

What a relief it was to no longer have the decision hanging over her head. She’d finally chosen her course. And she couldn’t be happier about it.

“But what about dancing?” Carlotta stabbed a forkful of salad and plopped it into her mouth.

“My agent hasn’t contacted me in weeks and—well—the truth is I’m going to need to build myself back up after my injury—maybe take some classes at the local studio. I already spoke to Ms. Audrey about it. And she said I could use the studio whenever it’s not in use.”

“Dancing with Ms. Audrey,” Ryleigh said dreamily, reaching for her wine glass. “Just like the good ol’ days.”

“So speaking of dancing—where’s your boyfriend tonight?” Carlotta took a big bite of her garlic bread.

“Aren’t you just the cutest?” Sadie said, rolling her eyes.

“Where’s the lie?” Carlotta tossed her glossy black hair over one shoulder.

“He’s out of town for a few days—on business. He’ll be back Sunday night.” She shoveled a big forkful of spaghetti into her mouth.

“Already got his schedule memorized. Must be pretty serious.”

“Leave her alone, Car,” Ryleigh said. “It’s none of our business.” She shot Sadie a sympathetic smile.

“Look, for the record, nothing—and I do mean nothing—is going on between me and Jameson. It was just a one-time thing. I won’t be going out with him again. So can we please drop this?” She grabbed her wine and downed the remaining contents of the glass.

Her friends eyed her as she drank, saying nothing.

Finally, Sadie thought. She knew they meant well enough. But she didn’t want to talk about Jameson McDaniels for one more second.

If only it were as easy to put him out of her mind.

\* \* \*

Jameson walked into Porters carrying a bouquet of a dozen red roses. It was a classic for a reason. And if an over-the-top gesture earned him a second date with Sadie, then it was worth the risk.

Ryleigh stood behind the cash register, ringing up a customer’s to-go order. When she finished, she turned toward Jameson with a sunny smile. “What beautiful flowers! Sadie’s going to love them.”

He smiled. “Thanks, Ryleigh. Is she around?”

“She’s actually in the back, finishing up with the online orders.”

Perfect timing, Jameson thought. “Mind if I head back there?”

“Be my guest,” she said, gesturing toward the revolving door.

When he walked into the kitchen area, Sadie was boxing up a variety of tasty-looking pastries. She glanced up, took in Jameson and the flowers, then returned to the task at hand.

“What are you doing here?”

Her tone wasn’t exactly unfriendly. But it also didn’t scream, “I’m happy to see you. Thanks for bringing me flowers.”

“I wanted to give you these.” He held out the roses. “To say thank you for the other night. I had a good time and hope you did, too.”

“Thanks, you can just set them there, on the counter. I’ll put them in water when I get a minute.”

She was still giving him the brush-off. But Jameson wasn’t sure why. He knew she’d had a good time on their date. She was too genuine to fake something like that. And they’d had breakfast together last Wednesday at Porters. She’d seemed to enjoy herself then, too.

So why was she still putting distance between them?

He dragged a hand through his tousled hair, still holding the flowers, as he contemplated his next move. Deciding honesty was the way to go, he said, “Sadie, I’m trying to walk a fine line here but I like spending time with you. I thought we both had fun the other night. Am I wrong?”

Sadie sighed, finally tearing her eyes away from the pastry box. “No. You’re not wrong.”

He grinned, taking a tiny step toward her. “I stopped by to ask if you’d like to go out this Friday night.”

She shook her head. “Can’t. I’m going with my grandparents out to dinner in Paola. It’s Grandpa Cliff’s first time since his surgery so it’s a pretty big deal.”

“Of course and you should be there. What about Saturday, then?”

She closed her eyes and pinched her forehead like she was fighting a headache. “Jameson, I just don’t know about this.”

He took another tentative step forward, laying the bouquet on the counter. “Don’t know about what? Saturday? I was thinking something simple like maybe dinner and a movie.”

She stared up at him, her blue eyes luminous. “I don’t know if this—if us—is a good idea.”

“The way I figure it, we’ve already got an attraction between us—it’s a little more than that for me but if you’re not there yet, I can respect that. It’s just a movie, Sadie. Maybe dinner afterwards if you feel up to it.” He was close enough

now to cover her hand on the table with his own. “Can’t we just give it a shot and see where things go?”

Sadie smiled ruefully, staring down at their overlapping hands. “Just dinner and a movie, huh?”

He held up three fingers. “Boy Scouts’ honor.”

“Okay,” Sadie said softly. “Dinner and a movie on Saturday.”

Jameson smiled, feeling like he’d just lassoed the moon. “Should we shake on it or something?”

She chuckled in response. “Do people actually do that?”

“They do in my world.” He moved closer, stopping only when his face was a mere inches from hers. “But we could seal the deal with another time-honored tradition.” Slowly so he wouldn’t frighten her, Jameson ran his thumb lightly down her cheek.

Her breathing hitched as she lifted her face to look at him.

And that was all the encouragement he needed to proceed. Jameson leaned in, pressing his lips gently to hers in a whisper of a kiss and a promise of more to come between them.

When he finally pulled away with considerable reluctance, he said, “I’ll pick you up at seven on Saturday.”

Jameson walked toward the swinging door to the dining area. And when he stole a final glance at Sadie, he was pleased to see her cheeks were rosy and her eyes vibrant as she watched him go.



\* \* \*

Three weeks passed quicker than a flash of lightning for Sadie.

It was a Wednesday evening, the third week of June, and the kind of hot that made your clothes stick to your body. She was still covering for Grandpa Cliff while he focused on his physical therapy. And after completing her morning chores around the farm, she'd darted over to Porters for a quick lunch and to help Ryleigh finish a boatload of online orders.

With the barn renovations scheduled to wrap next week, the contractors had already done a considerable amount of work on the small shed they were converting into an apartment for her grandparents. According to her calculations, if all went well and there were no unexpected setbacks, they could have Pemberley ready to receive guests by September.

And wouldn't that be nice for the fall?

Groups of eager tourists picking juicy apples. Haunted hayride-filled evenings when the weather turned crisp. The outdoor patio attached to Ryleigh's restaurant, brimming with jovial guests, mingling around the fire pit and oval-shaped pool, all aglow with fairy lights.

The images gave her chill bumps.

And renovations weren't the only thing moving steadily along.

Sadie had been seeing Jameson for the past few weeks. Lingering lunches at Porters and relaxing evenings at Jameson's. The occasional movie at the Paola theater. And an

unexpected trip to Wichita where they had dinner and toured a local art museum. Surprisingly, Jameson had a real eye for art.

And with each passing day, Sadie grew more and more impressed by him.

She stood at the stainless steel counter in Jameson's kitchen, putting the finishing touches on a homemade lasagna, Grandma Mae's special recipe. A drizzle against the huge kitchen windows created a serene ambiance. Jameson was chopping up fresh tomatoes she'd brought from her grandmother's garden for the salad.

They worked in agreeable silence with the soothing atmosphere of gentle rain and a cozy fire in the kitchen's brick fireplace. It was the perfect end to a productive day—just the way Sadie liked it.

“How's your grandfather doing with his therapy?” Jameson asked.

“He's doing remarkably well.” A smile touching her lips, Sadie poured the meat sauce layer into the baking pan. “His physical therapist says he should be good as new by the end of summer. They'll follow up with weekly home visits, but by the time Pemberley opens, he should be back to his old self.”

Jameson smiled. “You must be so relieved.”

“It feels like we've finally turned a corner.”

As he moved to stand behind her, Sadie dropped the ladle into the baking dish and turned to face him, entwining her

hands around his neck. She buried her face into his shirt and inhaled the woody scent of his cologne.

Sometimes, she found herself awestruck at just how far they'd come since she returned to Fontana. Each new, timid step into this uncharted territory with Jameson filled her with expected trepidation—and unexpected exhilaration. It was as if she'd unlocked this hidden chamber inside herself, revealing parts of her she'd never even known existed.

But she had to admit, they fit together. Somehow, it worked. And Sadie found herself relaxing more and more in his presence.

“Hi,” Jameson whispered into her hair. She wore it bundled on top of her head.

“Hi,” Sadie whispered back, lifting her face to meet his.

Jameson covered her lips with his and she gave herself over to the kiss, opening her mouth as his tongue danced with hers. When they finally broke apart, Jameson nuzzled her nose with his. “I needed that.”

“Me too,” Sadie said, planting a fleeting kiss on his lips.

It still took her by surprise—how quickly she'd grown attached to him.

And how she got butterflies in her stomach when he kissed her or looked at her with those stunning green eyes.

She hadn't stopped to analyze what it all meant.

Right now, she was taking things one day at a time. Just enjoying herself, like her friends had been nagging her to do.

They ate dinner at the ornate dining room table that could easily accommodate a party of ten. To add a touch of romance, Sadie had lit the tall candles in the center.

“I forgot the wine,” Jameson said, rising from his chair.

A few moments later, he returned with the promised bottle of spirits. “I hope you like it,” he said. “It’s a nineteen eighty-five Bordeaux. I’ve been saving it for something special.” He filled her wine glass. “Try it,” Jameson said, his tone eager.

Sadie swirled the glass to blend the flavors, then she brought it to her lips for a taste. The sweet and sultry undertones exploded on her tongue. “That might be the best wine I’ve ever tasted.” Sadie set the glass down and laid a cloth napkin across her lap.

“It really is good, isn’t it?” Jameson said, swirling his glass and taking another sip.

“So what’s special about tonight?” Sadie stabbed at her salad with a fork.

“Guess now’s as good a time as any,” Jameson said, his tone a mix of nerves and determination. He wiped his mouth with the cloth napkin and cast it aside. “There’s something I want to discuss with you.”

“Oh?” She stared at him, a knot of curiosity and unease forming.

She folded her hands in her lap to still them while she waited for him to continue.

“I had an idea,” Jameson said.

“Does this have something to do with Pemberley?” she asked, keeping her tone light. Though her stomach clenched with nervous anticipation.

“In a way—yes.”

“What did you have in mind?” She wished he would just spit it out already.

“Construction is set to begin on the main house pretty soon, right?”

“Yes, they’re almost finished with the restaurant and putting the finishing touches on my grandparents’ apartment.” She smiled, relieved to be talking about renovations. “I can’t wait to start decorating.”

“I’m excited for you,” Jameson said, an easy smile parting his lips. “So your grandparents are moving into the apartment when they start construction on the main house?”

Sadie nodded. “Yeah, Carlotta’s been helping me track down some interesting pieces from local auctions. I have some ideas for how I want to furnish it. Grandma Mae gave me her requests and, of course, we’ll move everything she wants to keep with her over from the main house.”

“Have you given any thought to where you’ll stay when the construction begins?” Jameson took a long swig of wine, eyeing her thoughtfully.

Sadie considered for a moment. “I assumed I’d bunk with Ryleigh for a while. Crash on the couch or something. Why?”

“Sure,” he said distractedly, taking another sip. “That makes sense.”

“Jameson, what are you not telling me?”

“I—think you should move in here,” he finished quickly.

Sadie stared at him, blinking. “You want us to live together? Doesn’t that feel a little premature?” She took a long swig of wine, hoping it would calm her racing heart.

“Not really,” Jameson said, threading his long fingers beneath his chin. “You spend most evenings here already. We usually grab lunch at Porters. How hard would it be to add in breakfast?”

“Jameson, living together is a big step.”

“But you said yourself you’ll need somewhere to crash. Wouldn’t you rather sleep in a king-sized bed as opposed to a cramped couch?”

“You mean sleep in your bed?” Her surprise gave way to anger.

It wasn’t like she hadn’t thought about it. But that didn’t mean she was ready to dive into an even more complicated situation with Jameson McDaniels. They were business partners. And, yeah, she’d made the mistake of blurring the lines on that when she’d kissed him.

But living together—even temporarily—would be crossing a line she couldn't come back from.

“That’s not what I meant. I was referring to one of the guest bedrooms. There are plenty to choose from.” Jameson closed his eyes, sighing. “What I’m trying to say is—I’m all in here. I’m serious about us.”

*Us.*

The word bounced around inside her head. She wasn't quite ready for things to get that serious, to be part of an “us” just yet.

And the way Jameson was staring at her made Sadie think they were no longer on the same page.

“I thought you understood,” Sadie said quietly.

“Understood what?” Jameson emptied the contents of his wine glass before setting it down a little too hard.

“I’ve enjoyed spending time with you over the past few weeks but...it’s only been a month.”

Jameson visibly tensed. “I’m sorry if the way I feel complicates things for you, but it’s how I feel.” He stared at his plate, refusing to meet her gaze.

“I think I should go,” she said, placing her napkin on the table and preparing to stand.

“Don’t leave,” Jameson pleaded, remorse coloring his features. “We can table this discussion for now. If you’re not ready...then I respect that. But the offer still stands.”

Sadie sat back down and fiddled with her napkin. She couldn't deny his declaration had taken her by surprise. But she also knew, given their history, her reasons for wanting to proceed with caution where he was concerned were sound. Even though that meant a constant internal tug-of-war between her own desires and the demands of timing.

And despite her growing attachment to Jameson, Pemberley—and her grandparents—still needed to be her top priority.

“Say something,” Jameson said. “Please.”

Sadie cleared her throat, pulling her plate toward her. “You should try the lasagna. It's Grandma Mae's recipe and she makes the best...but don't tell Ryleigh I said that.”

Jameson chuckled as the heated tension between them cooled, and thankfully, began dissipating. “Your secret's safe with me.”



# Chapter Eight



**B**Y THE END of June, construction on the main house at Pemberley was well underway.

Her heart constantly fluttering with boundless excitement and terrifying uncertainty about Pemberley's future, Sadie had made the decision to stay at Ryleigh's, taking the guest bed while Carlotta was in LA for a three-week night club booking.

Things were just simpler that way.

Jameson kept his word about not pushing the subject of her moving in. But it still hung in the air like a dancing firefly, flickering between them.

Despite their unresolved issue, Sadie was cautiously optimistic about where they were—enjoying each other's company whenever the opportunity presented itself.

On the final Saturday of the month, Jameson surprised her with an invitation to a Fourth of July carnival, just outside of Paola. And Sadie was bursting with excitement at the idea of it. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been to a carnival. Probably not since high school.

They arrived in Jameson's BMW, rolling into the grassy makeshift parking area on a rather balmy evening. While Jameson searched for a parking spot, Sadie marveled at the spectacle before her, gazing in childlike wonder at the bright lights and bustling crowds gathered inside the carnival.

She'd opted for worn jeans and soft brown boots that came halfway up her calves. A blue tank underneath a thin blue and green flannel shirt with her red hair in its usual braid completed her casual look. Jameson had also worn jeans—though his were pressed and looked much more expensive than Sadie's—and brown slip-on loafers with a green polo shirt that enhanced his amazing eyes.

When he opened her car door, Jameson pulled her close for a sumptuous kiss that left Sadie tingling down to her toes. Her hand slid easily into his as they left the parking area and strolled toward the ticket booth.

It was still light outside, though the sun had faded and would be setting in a few hours. They meandered through the kaleidoscope of attractions, catching glimpses of her childhood favorites—the Tilt-a-Whirl and the carousel.

The rousing melodies from a country band playing at the pavilion, all decked out in garlands of twinkling lights, caught Sadie's attention. She adored live music and vowed to pull Jameson onto the dance floor before the evening ended.

Game stalls and food vendors lined the glittery space as throngs of carnival goers flitted around, bouncing from spectacle to spectacle.

Sadie smiled as she watched them, enjoying the carnival's lively atmosphere. The enchanting aroma of buttered popcorn and funnel cake scented the air. Her spirits lifted just being able to experience it all.

Jameson squeezed her hand. "So what do you want to do first?"

"I think," she said, after deliberating, "we should do the Tilt-A-Whirl before we eat. I'm not sure junk food and spinning would be a good combination."

Jameson chuckled. "I think you're right. The Tilt-A-Whirl it is," he said as he stepped up to the ticket counter and presented his credit card to the attendant.

Then, they stood in line for the ride, waiting their turn.

"How's your grandfather doing?" he asked.

"His doctors are really pleased with his progress. Grandma Mae keeps him on a strict diet—lots of fish and chicken, no red meat, no alcohol—and he hates it as you would expect. But he's adjusting."

"And renovations on the main house are going smoothly?"

"The company you recommended has done excellent work so far."

"They're the best in the area. McDaniel Properties has been using them for decades and Bob's an old friend of my father's."

“I’m excited to begin furnishing the barn restaurant. Ryleigh’s having the time of her life working on some specialty dishes for the menu.”

The carnival worker opened the gate and Sadie selected one of the circular cars for them. Once settled behind the metal bar, they waited for the operator to start the ride.

It was even better than she remembered, Sadie thought as they whirled around. Feeling happy and slightly dizzy, she rested her head against the back of the car, closing her eyes to enjoy the whirlwind.

After devouring a delightful feast of hot dogs, popcorn, a funnel cake to share, and huge frosted mugs of beer, they wandered through the busy game stalls, enjoying the happy sights. Jameson selected a ring toss game and Sadie stood beside him, cheering him on as he flung the rings at the various wooden blocks.

After losing the first round, he turned to Sadie, shaking his head. “I used to be better at this.”

“I’m sure it’s hard to put in the hours required to become an expert ring tosser.” She tried to keep her face straight because he looked so disturbed about not winning a prize.

He laid three more tickets down on the counter. “I refuse to give up that easily. I’m going back in.”

She smothered a smile as she watched him furrow his brows in concentration before selecting a destination for his first ring. He chose a wooden stand the furthest back. It

seemed to Sadie a particularly difficult task to land the ring on such a distant target.

After holding the ring out in front of him at varying degrees, he released it with all the effort of an Olympic pole vaulter.

Sadie didn't think anyone could've been more surprised than Jameson when the ring circled the wooden slab before dropping down around it.

Jameson lifted both fists in the air. "Victory!" he cried, as Sadie and the rest of the onlookers clapped.

The worker behind the counter asked Jameson to choose a prize from the assortment of stuffed bears. He turned to Sadie and asked her which one she wanted.

After careful consideration, Sadie pointed to a medium-sized, gray Koala bear in the middle of the pile. The worker handed the Koala to Jameson.

With a huge grin, he turned to Sadie, holding out the bear. "Your prize, my lady."

"Thank you, good sir," Sadie said, taking the Koala and executing a curtsy. "I shall treasure it always." She wrapped her arms around the bear, reveling in its softness. She'd always been particularly fond of Koala bears.

As they headed toward the carousel, Sadie slid her hand into Jameson's, a gesture that was starting to feel automatic. They hadn't traveled far from the ring toss game when Sadie

thought she heard someone crying. She stopped walking, her head darting around, trying to locate the origin of the sound.

Jameson gave her a puzzled look. “What’s wrong?”

“Do you hear that? It sounds like someone crying.” She listened more intently and tried to discern where it was coming from.

Jameson frowned. “Yeah, I hear it, too.” He whipped his head around, searching for the person in distress.

“It sounds like a child,” Sadie murmured, wandering away. She walked toward the row of game stalls and the sound grew louder. Breaking into a run, she heard Jameson calling her name.

The sound guided her toward a small, hunched figure in the shadows of the basketball throw game stall at the end of the row. A small girl with a red ribbon tied into her long blond hair, sat in the grass, hugging her knees.

Sadie crouched down so they were at eye level. Realizing she still held the Koala bear, an idea took shape. “Hello,” Sadie said kindly. “My name is Sadie and my friend here is... um...Artie.” She held the bear out toward the child.

The little girl looked at Artie, her face tear-streaked and splotchy. She sniffed and took a shaky breath.

“Would you like to hold him?” Sadie asked.

The girl nodded, her blue eyes shimmering as the red ribbon in her hair fluttered against the evening breeze. Sadie laid Artie in the girl’s outstretched hands. She hugged the

Koala bear close, shutting her eyes and burying her wet face in Artie's downy fur.

Sadie searched for Jameson but didn't see him in the crowd. He'd find her eventually, she decided. "Can you tell me your name?" she asked when the girl seemed to have calmed down.

"Olive," she said in a small voice.

"It's nice to meet you, Olive," Sadie said, smiling. "Can you tell me how old you are?"

"I'm four but I'll be five next month." Olive buried her face into Artie's fur again, closing her blue eyes, a tiny smile lighting up her face.

"I heard there might be someone over here who likes cotton candy."

She turned to see Jameson holding out the enormous treat as he winked at Sadie.

"This is my friend, Jameson," she told Olive.

The girl laid Artie in her lap. "I like cotton candy," she said softly.

"Oh, well, here you go then." He handed her the sugar-spun treat and she eagerly pulled off a handful of the pink goodness, plopping it in her mouth.

Sadie smiled at Jameson, mouthing a thank you.

"So Olive, why were you crying?" Sadie asked in a gentle tone so as not to frighten her back to tears.

“I lost my mommy in the crowd,” Olive said in between bites of cotton candy. “I don’t know where she is.”

“I see,” Sadie said. “So it’s just you and your mom here tonight?”

Olive shook her head so hard that her hair ribbon looked as though it might take flight. “No, my daddy and my baby brother are here, too.”

She exchanged a pointed look with Jameson. “Well, how about if we help you find them?”

Olive stared up at Sadie, her blue eyes like saucers. “Mommy says I’m not supposed to talk to strangers.”

Jameson let out a low chuckle. “Fair enough. Why don’t I see if I can flag down a police officer to help us? I saw one walking around a little bit ago.” And he took off to find the officer.

Olive continued chomping her way through the pink cotton candy with Artie secure in her lap. She seemed almost oblivious to Sadie’s presence.

A few minutes later, Jameson returned with a woman police officer. She thanked Sadie for helping to keep Olive calm. Then, she smiled down at the little girl. “I heard you needed my help?”

Olive nodded solemnly, hugging the Koala bear tightly to her chest.

“Who’s your friend?” The police officer asked.



“He’s my new best friend, Artie.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Artie.” The police officer made a show of taking the bear’s hand and shaking it. “My name’s Sandy. Do you mind if you and Olive take a walk with me so we can find her family?”

Olive pressed Artie’s mouth against her ear as she consulted with her new friend, nodding her head as if they were having a private conversation only the two of them could understand. “Artie says that will be okay.” She turned her huge, blue eyes toward Jameson. “Can I keep the cotton candy?”

“It’s yours,” he said, sneaking a glance toward Sadie and winking.

Sensing the little girl’s next question, Sadie asked, “Would you mind looking after Artie for me, Olive? He seems to like you a lot better than me.”

Olive’s head bobbed up and down in response, her red hair ribbon flying.

The police officer thanked Jameson and Sadie one last time before extending her hand toward Olive. “Why don’t I hold Artie while you finish your cotton candy?”

Olive handed her Koala bear to Sandy. “Be careful with him,” she said, slipping her hand into the police officer’s.

“Bye, Olive. Take good care of Artie,” Sadie called.

The little girl waved as Sadie watched her disappear into the crowd, holding tight to the officer’s hand.

She turned to Jameson, letting her arms slip around his waist. “Thank you for your assistance.”

“It was nothing,” he said, planting a kiss on her forehead. “You know I can’t resist a damsel in distress.”

Sadie laughed in response, resting her head against his chest. The sun was fading into the horizon, coloring the sky in glorious cascades of pink and orange as the day made its final departure.

“Shall we take a spin on the Ferris Wheel?” Jameson asked.

From the top of the Ferris Wheel, the people down below looked so tiny. Like ants swarming an ant hill, Sadie decided. Lifting her face to gaze at the crescent moon and the canopy of stars, she snuggled against Jameson, wondering what the hell was the matter with her.

It almost felt like a dance between them, one where they couldn’t quite match the other’s movements. With Jameson taking two steps forward while she tried to tug him backward, in time with her.

And it was torture, constantly fighting the way she felt.

Jameson was a good man. And a kind one. And not at all like the boy she’d known in high school.

He’d told her he was all in—so why couldn’t she do the same?

Why was she still holding back?

Those were the questions that plagued her as the Ferris Wheel soared to its highest heights before falling to the Earth. The simple answer was she'd never expected to find this. Someone who made her feel like she could fly without the Ferris Wheel.

It was never the plan.

Okay, maybe it was the someday plan.

But it certainly wasn't supposed to happen with Jameson, with her childhood nemesis. She was supposed to despise him for the rest of her days.

At least, that had been her intention before she'd returned to Fontana.

But now, she was smack-dab in the middle of a completely confounding situation. And her resolve was slowly crumbling.

So what was she supposed to do about it? Give up her dancing?

Stay in Fontana and forget about the dreams she'd held onto like a lifeline since losing her parents? She didn't think she could do that.

Not now. Not ever.

But Sadie wasn't sure she'd be able to find the strength to walk away from Jameson either...when the time came. How were they supposed to move past this great divide between them? And was a future together even in the cards?

Trouble was Sadie couldn't envision a way forward for her and Jameson.

Not realistically.

Now if she could only make her heart understand.

Later that evening, as they waited for their turn on the carousel, Sadie saw Olive, still holding tight to Artie, riding one of the decorated horses. A woman with shoulder-length, honey-blond hair rode beside the little girl. Sadie assumed she was Olive's mother. Thinking she had played even a small part in their reunion filled Sadie with joy.

"Do you see what I see?" Jameson asked.

"We did a good thing. It makes me so happy to see Olive reunited with her mother." Even as she said it, Sadie felt a lump form in her throat.

"You know, your parents would be extremely proud of the woman you've become, Sadie," Jameson said quietly.

They moved forward with the line as Sadie blinked away unexpected tears.

"I was hoping I would've added a Broadway debut to my resume by now." She shrugged, feeling more hopeless about it than she cared to admit. "Sometimes, I wonder if I'll ever get there."

Jameson turned her gently toward him. "Don't say that. You still have time. If you want it then I know you can make it

happen. I've seen what you can do when you set your mind to something, Sadie Barnhart.”

They reached the ticket taker and Jameson handed him the appropriate number of tickets so they could board the carousel.

As they selected a pair of white horses and waited for the carousel to begin, all Sadie could think was, despite her best attempts at the contrary, she was falling for Jameson McDaniels.

And she was scared to death there was nothing she could do to stop it.

\* \* \*

When they finally stepped off the carousel— because Sadie had insisted they ride it twice—Jameson steered her toward a pavilion in the far corner of the grounds. Lively music from the band echoed through the midway.

“Feel like dancing?” he asked.

Her pretty smile widened. “I was hoping you would ask.”

The pavilion pulsed with life as Jameson guided Sadie through the happy crowd. Couples twirled around the dance floor while others mingled, standing or seated at foldable plastic tables that'd been set up, enjoying the music as they talked and lingered over their drinks.

He decided on a corner of the dance floor that seemed less crowded. Plus, it was right up front next to the band. They played a song he recognized as Tim McGraw's, and Jameson

pulled Sadie close, letting one hand rest on her waist while the other held hers close to his heart.

They swayed back and forth to the music. And he caught her off guard when he suddenly spun her out and back before dipping her.

“Wow, I didn’t know I was dancing with Fred Astaire.”

“I have moves you’ve never seen,” he said, grinning.

Jameson pulled her close and Sadie wrapped her arms around his neck.

He loved it when she did that. With Sadie in his arms, he felt like he could do just about anything. Sometimes it snuck up on him and hit him right in the gut, the realization he’d somehow earned the privilege of her trust.

And it wasn’t something he would ever take for granted.

The band finished the song and Sadie caught him by surprise when she stood on her tiptoes, pulled him down toward her, and kissed him long and deep.

And everything else just faded to black. He could only see Sadie.

Later, on the drive home, she reached over and grabbed his hand. “Thank you for tonight,” she said sincerely.

And he swore he could have soared to the moon and back.

When they weren’t too far away from his place, he said, “Do you want to stop in for a drink before I drop you off at

Ryleigh's? Or I can take you straight there if you're tired."

"No," Sadie said, her deep blue eyes catching the reflection of the moon. "I'm not tired. Let's go to your place. That sounds nice."

"Great," Jameson said, smiling to himself.

It was a perfect end to a perfect night in Jameson's estimation.

Sadie settled herself on the couch and he started a fire before heading into the kitchen to grab their drinks. A white wine spritzer with a lime for Sadie and he decided on the excellent Cognac he kept stocked for when he was in an especially good mood.

Like he was tonight.

They sat on the couch, talking, and the hours flew. He opened up about the NFL career he'd always dreamed of and how he'd handled the crippling disappointment. Sadie told him all about living in Chicago and navigating the harsh world of rejection she'd faced as a young dancer. Jameson honestly wasn't sure he could've handled the cut-throat competition and relentless defeat she described.

"So why do you keep putting yourself through it?" Jameson asked when she'd finished. "Because I really don't think I could."

Sadie stared at him, blinking, as she considered his words. "Because...it's everything I've spent my life working toward. I can't just give up and walk away."

The wall clock chimed, shifting the mood. “It’s getting pretty late,” he said. “Do you want me to drive you to Ryleigh’s?”

Sadie glanced out the window. “It’s starting to rain. And I don’t want you to have to drive in it. Do you mind if I just... crash here tonight?” She downed the remains of her wine spritzer.

“Of course not. You can stay in one of the guest rooms.” He smiled at Sadie, happy she was there—hell—happy she was in his life.

\* \* \*

Sadie lay awake in the large, four-poster guest bed with its cream satin sheets and matching velvet-soft comforter. Her thoughts kept her wired and awake, despite the alcohol which, at first, had made her drowsy.

It had been such a magical night.

And she wasn’t quite sure when it happened. But her feelings for Jameson had grown. Evolving into something all-consuming. It was painful, the knowledge he was just down the hall—so close, but too far away to reach out and touch. There was an ache in her heart, a bittersweet longing inside that threatened to devour her.

Sadie sighed, turning over on her stomach and pressing her cheek against the satin pillowcase. She’d been tossing and turning for hours. Wrestling with herself.



When Jameson had asked her to move in, the idea had seemed a little crazy...but now, it didn't seem so absurd. And it sufficed to say it was getting harder and harder to leave him at the end of the night.

So the question was what should she do about it?

The answer, of course, was staring her in the face. But she'd already turned him down once. And was it fair to take their relationship to the next level when she couldn't promise she'd still be here six months from now?

Sadie had meant what she'd said earlier. She wasn't ready to give up on the hopes she'd carried with her since childhood. They were too precious for her to toss them aside, forgotten and left to dwindle to nothing.

No, she couldn't do that.

But...if Jameson could embrace the temporariness of their situation just as she'd chosen to embrace forgiveness where their past was concerned, maybe...

She flopped onto her back, staring up at the ceiling, her red hair splayed across the pillow. Closing her eyes, she let out a loud sigh, before tossing the cream-colored bedding aside and sliding out of bed.

Glancing down at the faded blue Notre Dame t-shirt Jameson had loaned her to sleep in, Sadie decided it would have to do. Since she didn't feel like sliding back into the clothes she'd tossed into a wrinkled, messy pile on the cream upholstered chair beside the bed.

She opened the door and stepped into the hallway. Her bare feet smacking against the wood floors as she walked. When she reached Jameson's room, she paused, rubbing her lips together. Attempting to calm her nerves, trying to gather her courage, before knocking.

It took a minute for Jameson to open the door. And when he did, Sadie bit back a smile. His blonde hair stood up in tufts as he rubbed his sleepy, green eyes.

"Sadie?" he asked, yawning. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," she said quickly. "Sorry to wake you..." Her voice trailed off as she noticed he was only wearing a pair of black boxer briefs. She swallowed hard as her cheeks flushed.

"It's okay," he said. "What did you want?" His gaze flickered over her, lingering on her bare legs before returning to her face.

It was now or never, Sadie decided. "Do you remember the question you asked me at dinner last week?"

He furrowed his eyebrows. "The question I asked you." He said it as if he were trying to refresh his memory. Recognition flashed in his green eyes. "Look, Sadie, that's water under the bridge. You don't have to worry—"

"Ask me again," she said slowly, her breath catching in her throat as she waited.

He took a step closer, his green eyes darkening. "You don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with," he said softly.

“I know,” she said, reaching for his hand. “Ask me again.”

A ghost of a smile lit up his face and he cleared his throat. “Sadie Barnhart, would you consider moving in with me?”

She grinned. “I thought you’d never ask.”

In response, Jameson lifted her off the floor and into his arms, holding her against his chest as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Is that a yes?” Jameson whispered, his mouth next to hers.

Sadie nodded. “Yes.”

With a sudden jerk, Jameson pulled her into his bedroom, his mouth covering hers.

And she was lost in a dizzying whirlwind of hunger. And need.

But this time, Sadie didn’t fight it.

# Chapter Nine



**S**ADIE PUNCHED HER favorite playlist into her phone and adjusted her earbuds as she prepared to stretch.

Ms. Audrey had just finished up with her last class of beginner ballet students for the evening and Sadie finally had the studio to herself.

After a month of putting herself through five grueling dance workouts a week, the effort was paying off.

Her ankle was regaining its strength. She'd been to see her old doctor and he'd agreed with her physical therapist in Chicago that it would take time to build her ankle back up to its previous performance level.

But with time and a little sweat, it could be done.

The sweating she didn't mind. But the time was a little harder to come by these days.

Nevertheless, she came to Ms. Audrey's and pushed herself through a two-hour workout five evenings a week, refusing to lose the dancing skill level she'd worked so hard to achieve.

Her go-to for rebuilding strength involved an intense training routine she'd created, pulling bits and pieces from her years of ballet instruction.

Nothing fine-tuned a dancer's core strength and muscle control like ballet. Though she enjoyed all types of dance, the foundation of all techniques could be traced back to ballet with its long lines and graceful, disciplined movements.

Sadie moved to the barre against the mirrored wall in the back of the room. She began a series of leg exercises, starting in first position with her toes pointed outward, then fluidly moving through the other positions. Finishing the warm-up, she brought her right foot in front of her left, the toes of her back foot in perfect alignment with the heel of her front in fifth position.

In the center of the room, she prepared for pointe work, wearing her lucky pink shoes. Ribbon straps that weaved up her calves and scuff marks from too many years of use. They'd carried her through countless teeth-grinding auditions and back-aching rehearsals.

She powered through an arabesque sequence, elongating her limbs and focusing on improving her balance while showcasing the gracefulness she'd honed over her years of practice. Then she executed a string of pirouettes en pointe, focusing on muscle control, good posture, and overall balance.

After her pirouettes, Sadie completed her petit allegro jumps across the floor, focusing on balance while displaying

the beauty of the movement. She transitioned into an array of sauté arabesques then finished with a grand jeté.

Returning to the barre, she cooled down with some pliés. And while she completed the movements, her mind drifted to the upcoming Miami County Fair.

Pemberley Farm had secured a booth at one of the biggest, annual events in the county. Ryleigh would be creating a selection of goodies for people to sample and purchase. They would also showcase a variety of Grandma Mae's quilts and homemade jams.

Carlotta and Sadie were designing colorful brochures to highlight their tourism plans for Pemberley and they would display the final mock-up for the farm once renovations were complete. Jameson had converted Sadie's preliminary sketches into beautiful digital prints they were using in the brochures.

They would use the county fair to advertise and secure bookings for the fall on both the bed-and-breakfast stays and the tourist day passes.

It was all coming together, Sadie thought, as she ended her cool down with a grand plié. Hard to believe only two months ago she'd returned to Pemberley in a beat-up rental, intending to help her grandparents out for a few weeks, with no real plan for the future.

And now she had the satisfaction of knowing she was helping to build something out of their farm that would last, hopefully, for generations to come.

\* \* \*

On Saturday morning, Sadie drove to Pemberley for a much-needed catch-up with Grandma Mae. Carlotta and Ryleigh would be joining them for brunch and she couldn't wait to see her best friends.

It felt like ages since the four of them had gotten together for a good, old-fashioned gossip like they used to have in high school.

Sadie brought the truck to a stop in the driveway next to the freshly-renovated shed that now served as a small apartment for her grandparents. Cutting the engine, she grabbed the bowl of mixed berries she'd prepared earlier at Jameson's and climbed out of the truck.

She headed up the brick walkway to the front door, painted fire-engine red at her grandmother's request. A colorful wreath filled with an array of decorative flowers—one of her grandmother's creations—adorned it.

After knocking twice, the door opened. Her grandmother's bright, blue eyes and flushed cheeks greeted her.

"I'm so glad we're doing this," Sadie said, encircling her grandmother's trim waist and pulling her in for a hug.

"Me too." Grandma Mae grabbed the fruit bowl and took a step back to look at Sadie. She wore a navy blue apron dotted with bunches of ripe cherries.

It was so damn happy that Sadie couldn't help but smile. Her grandmother grinned back at her. She looked all lit up

from the inside out.

“Grandpa’s at physical therapy this morning,” Grandma Mae said. “Mr. Sloane drove him into town and then they’re heading to Porters for breakfast before they come back here for some fishing this afternoon.”

“Sounds like he’s back to his old self.” Sadie followed her grandmother down the creamy beige-carpeted hallway into the kitchen.

“They’ll be releasing him to outpatient follow-up with a home-care therapist next week,” Grandma Mae called out over her shoulder. She set Sadie’s berries on the kitchen island then went to the counter next to the sink and poured coffee into a sunny, yellow mug that she handed to Sadie.

At Grandma’s insistence, the kitchen made up the largest part of their apartment. She believed the kitchen was the beating heart of a home.

The contractors had built onto the back of the shed to make the space rather expansive. Sliding doors opened to a generous-sized patio with more than enough room for Grandpa Cliff’s grilling station. He’d always enjoyed grilling outdoors when the weather allowed. And Sadie knew he was itching to get back to it.

The brand-new stove, which included a wall oven and microwave, encompassed the back side of the kitchen. Positioned in front of the stove was a white standard-size island with matching tall chairs. Opposite the island, was her grandmother’s cherry wood kitchen table she’d inherited from



her own grandmother many years ago. A pretty lace tablecloth covered the cherry wood with a bright bouquet of colorful daisies in a marbled blue vase in the center.

Sadie sat at the table and reached for the half-and-half Grandma Mae put out. She dumped some into her coffee and used a spoon to stir it around before adding a teaspoon of sugar and taking a sip. She closed her eyes, briefly indulging in the delicious, warm hit of sweet caffeine. “Do you need any help with breakfast?”

“I think everything’s covered. My sausage gravy is simmering on the stove and the biscuits will be done any minute. Ryleigh’s bringing a selection of pastries and Carlotta offered to pick up some orange juice and champagne for mimosas from the market. Why don’t you tell me all about your new beau while we wait for the others.” Her blue eyes twinkled with amusement.

She hadn’t had a chance to talk to her grandmother about Jameson. They’d both been crazy busy over the past few months. Sadie could feel the heat rushing to her cheeks—the fair-skinned curse—as her words tumbled out. “Oh—well—things are...um...pretty good. We’re just trying to enjoy the moment. You know how it is.” She took a deliberate, long sip from her mug, hoping to avoid her grandmother’s scrutiny.

“You look happy, my girl. Any boy who puts color into your cheeks at the mention of him is worth hanging onto in my book.” Grandma Mae smiled at Sadie before transferring the gravy into a delicate, blue-and-white-patterned serving bowl.

She pulled the biscuits from the oven and left them on the stove to cool. Then she grabbed her blue coffee mug from the counter and joined Sadie at the table.

“I am happy, Grandma. And believe me, I never expected to be.”

“Not with Jameson?” Grandma Mae took a careful sip of her coffee, her blue eyes probing Sadie for answers.

“I think we both know I’d planned on hating him for the rest of my life.”

“I do remember you expressing that sentiment back in high school.” Grandma Mae smiled at Sadie as she reached for her hand. “Life has a way of laughing at our plans, doesn’t it?”

“It certainly does.” Sadie took another sip of coffee, letting the velvety-smooth taste slide down her throat as she considered Grandma Mae’s words. “If you would’ve told me that I would be dating Jameson McDaniels when I was eighteen I would’ve said you were crazier than a road lizard.”

Grandma Mae took another long sip of coffee, nestling the blue mug between her hands as she shook her head at Sadie with a smile.

“I must be crazy,” Sadie mused. “But it works—somehow, we fit together. I’m not sure what to make of it but...I can’t deny things have been good so far.”

“I think it’s best not to overthink it, dear,” Grandma Mae said. “If it’s meant to work out between you two then it will.”

Sadie nodded. “He’s just—not at all how I expected he would be. Does that make sense?”

“It does. But what a wonderful surprise. Never forget, love is a rare gift that needs to be cherished.” Grandma Mae went to the stove. Pulling a red-and-white-checkered bread basket from a cupboard, she began transferring biscuits from the baking tray into the basket.

While her grandmother finished breakfast, Sadie ruminated on their conversation.

Who’d said anything about love?

She and Jameson were just having fun. Sure, she was very fond of him—and no one was more surprised by that than Sadie. But love was a huge commitment.

And Sadie was nowhere near ready for that.

She was determined not to let her relationship with Jameson steal her focus away from the other things in her life that demanded her attention.

Like her grandparents. And running her new Pemberley business venture. And her dance career. They were all too important to Sadie for her to lose her head over a guy.

After all, she wasn’t Carlotta who lived for the drama. Or Ryleigh who was head-over-heels in love with the idea of being in love. She was the sensible one—the level-headed one.

And Jameson McDaniels wasn’t going to change her plans.

By the time Carlotta and Ryleigh arrived, Sadie had pushed all thoughts of her complicated love life to the back of her mind.

They made a jolly party, all talking at once, as they lingered at the breakfast table. Savoring their mimosas after they'd stuffed themselves with Grandma Mae's biscuits drenched in sausage gravy and Ryleigh's pastries.

The conversation inevitably turned to the upcoming Miami County Fair at the end of July. It would be excellent publicity for their grand opening in the middle of September. Just in time to welcome the glorious fall season.

"I can't wait to see the rodeo!" Ryleigh's blonde curls bounced around her face as she spoke. "It's always my favorite part."

Carlotta rolled her eyes. "Please, a bunch of cowboy wannabes covered in dirt as they parade around on horses acting out their little-boy, macho fantasies? No thank you." She took a long swig of her mimosa.

"As long as they're handsome cowboy wannabes I'll certainly enjoy the show," Grandma Mae said, her blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Grandma Mae!" Sadie said, laughing as she covered her face with her hands.

"What?" Her grandmother lifted her glass. "I may be old but I'm not dead yet." She winked and downed the rest of her mimosa before setting the empty glass down.

“I guess I could handle some hot, dirty cowboys,” Carlotta said, a mischievous smile playing on her lips.

“They always put on such a good show,” Ryleigh said sincerely. “I promise you will not be disappointed.”

“Well, I’m just looking forward to all the business the fair could drum up for Pemberley.” Sadie looked over at Carlotta. “How are the brochures coming?”

Carlotta gave a little salute in Sadie’s direction. “Everything’s right on schedule, boss. My graphic designer friend is finishing up the final layout this week then we’ll send it to the printers.”

“And I have a new recipe I’ve been working on. It’ll be something exclusive for Pemberley. I was thinking it could be like a signature staple of our dining experience but we’d also sell it in the online shop if it takes off like I hope it will.” Ryleigh leaned forward, resting her pretty face in her hands.

“Sounds fantastic,” Sadie said. “What is this amazing culinary wonder?”

Ryleigh’s green eyes swept over the three of them. “I’ve been playing around with an old recipe I found—it belonged to my great-grandmother. It’s a recipe for rum cake.”

“Rum cake?” Sadie asked thoughtfully. “I like it. I like it a lot, actually. And the fact that it could be a Pemberley exclusive is an excellent marketing idea. Well done.” She lifted her glass in Ryleigh’s direction.

“If it’s a hit can we start calling you Rum-Cake Ryleigh?” Carlotta asked, her brown eyes sparkling with amusement.

“If it’s a hit?” Grandma Mae scoffed. “Of course it’ll be a hit. Have you tasted those pastries? Our Ryleigh never misses.”

Ryleigh’s face glowed with pride. Coming from Grandma Mae, it was high praise, indeed. A fantastic baker who’d won many a county fair with her locally famous pies, she knew a thing or two about excellence.

And she was right—anything Ryleigh made was guaranteed to be a surefire hit.

“To Rum-Cake Ryleigh,” Sadie said, raising her glass. And the others followed suit.

\* \* \*

On a perfect Saturday afternoon in the middle of July, Sadie stretched out her bare legs in front of her on the red picnic blanket, enjoying the view of Hillside Lake.

With Jameson lying beside her, in that moment, there was no place on earth she would’ve rather been. When he’d suggested a picnic near the lake followed by a hike on one of the winding trails, Sadie had happily agreed.

But now, lounging on the blanket, with her face tipped up to the sun while the lake breeze nipped at her bare shoulders, Sadie thought a post-lunch nap sounded like a much better idea.

Shifting her head toward Jameson, she opened one eye to find him gazing at her.

“What?” she asked, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

Jameson laughed. “Can’t a guy just enjoy a spectacular view?”

“Yes, but the lake is that way.” Sadie pointed a finger in the direction of the sparkling water.

“I wasn’t talking about the lake,” he said with a smile.

With a shake of her head, Sadie planted a quick kiss on his lips. “You’re impossible.”

Sadie’s phone buzzed from beside her on the blanket so she reached over and retrieved it. Her agent, Lenora, was calling. “Hello?”

“Sadie,” Lenora’s sunny voice rang out through the speaker. “I have some excellent news.”

She mouthed “sorry” to Jameson as she gestured at her phone. “What news is that?”

“I need you to come back to Chicago ASAP,” she said with excitement. “I have an audition lined up for you.”

Lenora launched into a description of a Broadway show holding dance auditions in Chicago at the end of the month. “I submitted your info and got you an audition slot for one of the principal dancers. Are you excited?” Lenora asked.

Over the years, Lenora had come to be someone Sadie thought of as a friend. Not much older than Sadie, she’d

started agenting around the time that Sadie moved to Chicago. Her old roommate, Natalia, went to school with Lenora and had set up a meeting for Sadie within those first few weeks of her big move. It had been an advantageous connection that had landed her some local theater work and two national tours within the past five years.

“That’s fantastic news,” Sadie said halfheartedly.

Except she didn’t feel fantastic. She felt like a deflated balloon, her perfectly good mood evaporating.

“So get your butt back to the city. I need you in tip-top shape. You should probably take a few classes if you can. Have you been dancing at all down in the boondocks?” Lenora was a lifelong city dweller who thought growing up on a farm in the middle of Kansas was comparable to living on another planet.

“I’ve been working out and, yes, I have taken some dance classes.” Sadie chewed on her bottom lip, glancing over at Jameson lying on his side as he scrolled through his phone.

“How’s the ankle? The doc released you from physical therapy, right?”

“Yeah, he said I’m cleared for dance but it’ll take some time to build my ankle back up to where it was.”

“Exactly, so get back here and get down to business. No offense to Kansas, but I doubt you’re going to find the rigorous training you need for that ankle there. The audition is only a few weeks away. Come back. I’ll get you into one of



the best dance studios in the city. I know someone good and she owes me a favor.”

Lenora prattled on about dance classes and the audition but Sadie’s head was spinning.

An audition for a New York show?

It was everything she’d been working toward.

“Wait,” Sadie interrupted. “When did you say the audition was?”

“The end of the month. Why?”

The county fair was at the end of the month. They were in full prep mode for it. How could she just drop everything and head back to Chicago? She didn’t even have a place to live. And Natalia had already sent Sadie all of her things.

“Um, I don’t know if Natalia told you but I moved out of our apartment. I don’t have a place to stay.”

“Yeah, she told me,” Lenora said breezily. “Big deal. I can find you somewhere to crash while you’re in town. I know another dancer that’s looking for a roommate.”

Sadie glanced over at Jameson. He’d put his phone down and was staring transfixed at the picnic blanket.

It wasn’t hard to guess what he was thinking about.

“Look, Lenora, I need some time to think about it. I’m kind of in the middle of something at the moment. Can I call you later?”

Lenora paused before responding. “Well...okay. Just don’t take too long. This is a great opportunity, Sadie. You don’t want to miss this audition. It could be your big break.”

“I understand. We’ll talk later.”

Sadie heaved out a sigh. The opportunity of a lifetime had finally come calling. But how could she answer it when it meant deserting the people she loved most?

She put her phone down and looked over at Jameson.

He was staring at her, those green eyes hopelessly dazzling in the midday sun.

Her stomach sinking, Sadie said, “Sorry about that. Agents—you know?” She smiled sheepishly.

“Sure,” he said evenly. “So...you’re leaving?”

“Well...there are some details to hammer out before I’d leave but Lenora—that’s my agent—she thinks I shouldn’t miss this audition.”

“And it’s at the end of the month?”

“Yeah.” Sadie stared at her hands, folded in her lap, unable to meet his gaze.

“What about the county fair? I thought it was a huge opportunity for Pemberley?”

“It is,” she said quickly. “And I have no intention of bailing on everyone. I just need some time to figure things out.”

“But you plan on doing it, right? The audition?”

“Um...yeah, I mean—I—I don’t know...maybe,” she stammered, her face growing hot. When he didn’t say anything, Sadie continued, “My dancing’s important to me, Jameson.”

“I know it is,” Jameson said as she turned to look at him. “And I would never ask you to give that up but...do you really think it’s the best time to be auditioning?”

“I don’t have any control over when auditions come up. They just do. That’s the life of a dancer. I’m sorry if you can’t understand that.” The air between them had taken on a different energy. The romantic mood vanished and in its place, a dark cloud had settled.

Jameson looked taken aback by her words. “I know you can’t control the timing of auditions,” he said slowly. “What I’m saying is do you have to do *this* audition? There will be others. Doesn’t it make more sense to stay here and make sure Pemberley has a successful opening?”

“Look, I don’t expect someone like you to understand why I would want to do this,” Sadie said briskly. She busied herself with closing food containers and tidying the picnic area, anything to avoid looking at Jameson.

“Someone like me? I’m sorry, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean everything in your life has been handed to you on a silver platter. It’s not like you would know anything about working yourself to death in pursuit of a dream.”

She knew she was lashing out at him but she didn't care. His chastising words had stung and Sadie was still reeling from them.

And from what they meant for her future with Jameson.

"I know plenty about working hard for my dreams, thank you very much," Jameson said tensely. "But this isn't about me. It's about you and your promise to get Pemberley up and running."

"Are you speaking as my investor or my boyfriend?" she snapped. "Because I don't owe you a damn thing either way."

He looked angrier than she'd ever seen him. "Go ahead... push all this off on me if it makes you feel better. But you can't run from your guilt."

"Guilt?" she asked, indignant anger coursing through her. "What do I have to feel guilty about?"

"For leaving everyone in the lurch. I think you see an opportunity to run away and you're taking it."

"And why would I want to run?"

"Because you're afraid—of the uncertainty that comes with a new business...and a new relationship."

Sadie scrambled to her feet. She'd heard enough.

"I think I should go," she said softly. "Before we both say things we'll regret."

They'd driven to the lake separately so Sadie could check in with Ryleigh at Porters after their date. And at the moment,

Sadie had never been more thankful for her grandmother's truck.

“Wait,” Jameson said. “Don't leave like this.” He stood and ran a hand down Sadie's arm which, despite everything, still made her skin tingle and her stomach tighten. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you angry.”

“I know you didn't. You were just telling me how you felt,” Sadie said, staring out at the glassy lake. “Now I'm telling you how I feel. I need some time, Jameson. I have a decision to make and I want some space. I think I should crash at Ryleigh's for a few days. I'll stop by your place tomorrow and pick up some of my things.”

She brought her eyes to his face. He looked visibly pained, the hurt in his eyes piercing Sadie through the heart.

“Alright,” he said quietly. “Take all the time you need. You know where to find me when you want to talk.”

Her eyes filled and she blinked away the tears, a gargantuan lump forming in her throat as she nodded.

Jameson removed his hand from her arm and she leaned down to retrieve her purse.

Sadie practically ran back to her truck.

But she couldn't move fast enough to keep the tears from falling. Why was she blubbering like a baby? The tears just refused to stop.

It felt like something had broken—something she might not be able to fix.

And as she put the key into the ignition, Sadie saw Jameson in the distance, still standing in the middle of the red picnic blanket.

Watching her drive away.

# Chapter Ten



**J**ULY'S SWELTERING EMBRACE lingered on the streets of downtown Chicago as Sadie's cab cruised through the city's bustling arteries.

Her heart raced with anticipation and not just for the audition ahead. She was hoping against hope for Pemberley's success at the county fair.

Needing to make sure things were on track back at home, Sadie checked in with Carlotta and Ryleigh over FaceTime for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Everything's set for the county fair, right?" Sadie asked.

"Check," Ryleigh said, beaming. "I'm heading over there as soon as I get off the phone with you. We set up the booth yesterday and it looks amazing!"

"It really does," Carlotta agreed. "The sketches you drew for the design were a godsend. I'll spend the morning helping Ryleigh then I'll meet the safety inspector at Pemberley in the afternoon. Relax, okay? We have everything covered here. You just focus on your audition."

Just when she'd thought the weekend couldn't get any more complicated, the local safety inspector was leaving for a three-week vacation and could only come out to Pemberley the weekend of the fair.

"I promise today is going to be a success for all of us," said Ryleigh, a big smile on her pretty face. "So you don't need to worry. And your audition is going to be fabulous. I only wish I could be there to see it."

Sadie smiled. Talking to her friends helped calm the jitters that inevitably came before an audition.

Of course, it didn't help that this was a big audition—maybe even the biggest of her career.

She'd barely been able to choke down a cup of coffee before leaving the apartment Lenora had found for her. Megan, the girl it belonged to, was out of town and wouldn't return until the middle of next week. So it worked out perfectly for Sadie to crash there.

"I can't thank you both enough for everything you've done. I'm just sorry I couldn't be with you today."

"If anyone understands how auditions come at a moment's notice, it's me," Carlotta said, tossing her dark hair over her shoulder. "No apology necessary. Just kill it today."

"Copy that," Sadie said.

"Have you heard from Jameson?" Ryleigh asked.

Sadie picked at a corner of her ballet bag on the seat beside her. "We haven't spoken since that day at the lake."



He'd been gone when she'd collected her things from his house...and left her key.

"I told him I wanted space and he—he didn't object."

"That doesn't mean he isn't missing you," Ryleigh said, trying to be encouraging.

"He's probably moved on by now. I think things are finished between us." Her stomach clenched as she spoke the words out loud she hadn't been able to say to herself.

She missed Jameson a whole lot more than she'd expected to...but she still wasn't ready to call him. If they had the conversation then it really would be over. And a tiny piece of her just didn't want to let him go.

Not yet.

Even though she knew she needed to.

"Well, don't think about any of that today," said Carlotta. "Focus on your audition. You can fix things with him when you get back—I mean if you still want to."

"I should go," Sadie said. "I'm almost to the theater. Good luck today. I'll call later tonight."

She paid the driver and turned her attention toward the majestic Palace Theater standing before her. It was one of her favorite places in Chicago. She'd seen plenty of shows over the years and even performed here on her two regional tours.

It felt a little kismet to be auditioning here now. Sadie took it as a good omen.

She hurried to the backstage area and stripped off her leggings and t-shirt, revealing a black leotard underneath. She pulled out her sheer pink ballet skirt, tied it around her waist, then dropped to the floor to stretch out her feet and lace up her lucky ballet shoes.

Since this was more of a traditional dance show, Lenora had instructed Sadie to prepare a classical ballet piece.

Fifteen minutes later, she'd completed her warm-up stretches, checked her hair to make sure it was still slicked into the perfect ballet bun and reapplied a fresh coat of her favorite red lipstick.

Nothing to do now but wait for her name to be called.

A handful of other dancers lingered in the backstage area but not too many since this was a closed audition. She'd learned a long time ago not to psych herself out before an audition by comparing herself to the other dancers.

Instead, she closed her eyes and began a meditation. It was her go-to for centering herself before an audition.

Her phone buzzed from inside her bag. As she fished it out, she saw it was Jameson wanting to FaceTime.

Clearing her throat, she answered. "I only have a few minutes."

"I just wanted to wish you luck." Jameson smiled at her through the screen and Sadie's heart squeezed. She really did miss him like crazy. "I know we're giving each other space but I needed you to know that I'm rooting for you, Sadie. You

look beautiful by the way. You're going to knock their socks off."

"Thanks." Sadie smiled. His encouraging words brought her unexpected comfort. "I'm glad you called. It means a lot. But I should probably finish my audition prep."

"Good luck," he said with a wistful smile.

As the screen went dark, tears sprang to her eyes but she blinked them away. She needed to focus on her audition, Sadie thought, taking a deep, cleansing breath.

She slipped her phone back into her bag as a petite woman with honey-blonde hair coiled into a bun appeared.

"Sadie Barnhart?" she asked, staring in Sadie's direction.

Lenora had already submitted her photo and resume so they must know what she looked like.

"Yes," she said with a bright smile. "That's me."

She gestured for Sadie to follow her. "They're ready for you, Ms. Barnhart."

Sadie nodded at the woman and took another deep breath before following her onto the massive stage.

\* \* \*

Sadie pulled Grandma Mae's truck into an empty parking spot in front of Porters.

It was still early in the day, just after breakfast rush. She cut the engine and slid out, shutting the door behind her.

Sadie wished she had some idea of what she was walking into. All Ryleigh had said was they needed to have a meeting as soon as she got back home.

Taking a deep breath, Sadie pushed open the restaurant's swinging door, making a beeline for their usual table. Ryleigh had been working on filling their online orders with her team since the early morning. And Carlotta had left the apartment before Sadie even woke up.

She'd arrived home late from her evening flight out of Chicago and had taken a cab from Kansas City back to Fontana. Sadie supposed she could've asked Jameson or Carlotta to pick her up. But she still wasn't ready to talk to Jameson. And she didn't want her friend to have to make the long drive into the city late at night.

So she'd opted for a cab and some quiet reflection.

Sadie had done well enough on her audition, executing the routine just as she'd practiced, but there was no way to know if she'd impressed the casting director enough for a call-back. Lenora would let her know if that was the case.

Either way, it would do no good to stew over something she had no control over. She'd done her best and that was all she could do.

Ryleigh and Carlotta appeared through the swinging door leading to the kitchen. As they made their way to the table, Sadie smiled. "How did online orders go this morning?"

“Oh—everything went fine,” Ryleigh said, avoiding Sadie’s gaze as she slid out a chair for herself.

Something was up, Sadie thought, watching both of them. They made a point of not looking at her.

“Okay—what?” Sadie asked. “I can’t take this anymore. Tell me or I’ll imagine the worst. Did something happen at the county fair?”

“No,” Ryleigh said quickly. “Our booth was a huge success. We sold lots of Grandma Mae’s quilts and our baked items. The individual rum cakes were a big hit.”

“That’s fantastic,” Sadie said. “So then what’s with the long faces?”

Sadie turned to Carlotta who’d been uncharacteristically quiet ever since she sat down. Carlotta slowly lifted her dark eyes to meet Sadie’s.

“There was a problem with the safety inspection,” Carlotta said evenly.

“Oh?” Sadie said, mystified. “What kind of problem?”

“We failed the inspection,” Carlotta said.

“Wait—what?” Sadie blinked at Carlotta, her heart sinking.

“I’m so sorry.” Ryleigh reached her hand across the table toward Sadie.

“I don’t understand.” Sadie raked a hand through her long hair. She’d been in a rush to get to Porters so she’d barely

managed to run a brush through it before hurrying out the door. It hung down her back like a heavy curtain. “How did this happen?” She mentally ran through the checklist to ready the farm for final inspection.

What had she missed?

“We didn’t complete the fire inspection,” Carlotta said tensely, staring at her hands. “You were supposed to handle that while Ryleigh and I got everything ready for our booth at the fair. What happened?”

She was supposed to call the fire department and set it up before she left for Chicago. And she’d planned on handling it. Her stomach tightened at the realization.

She’d never set it up.

She’d been focused on perfecting her audition routine. And—it had slipped her mind.

How could she have let this happen?

Sadie swallowed hard, taking in Ryleigh’s sympathetic expression and Carlotta’s cool gaze. “I forgot to set it up. I was so busy getting ready for my audition...but that’s no excuse.” She sighed. “I owe you both a huge apology. I didn’t hold up my end of the bargain.”

Carlotta sighed. “Well, the inspector said he couldn’t schedule another final safety inspection until the second week of September at the earliest.”

“And that means we’ll have to push back the opening,” Ryleigh said softly.

“Which is unfortunate since Ryleigh and I already managed to snag some advanced bookings for September. Because the fliers I printed out, the ad campaign I launched online—all of it—said we’d be opening Labor Day weekend. Now we have to call all those guests and tell them we won’t be able to follow through with the booking. Not exactly a great way to start a new business. Excellent word of mouth is key to growing our clientele. Happy customers lead to more happy customers.”

“I’m so sorry.” She didn’t know what else to say. How could she make this up to her friends? And what about her grandparents? Sadie felt like she was going to be sick.

Carlotta rubbed her temples as she closed her eyes, her elbows resting on the table. “Sorry isn’t going to undo the damage you’ve done.”

“Car, I’m sure Sadie feels terrible,” Ryleigh said, reaching out to touch Carlotta’s arm. “She never meant to forget to set up the fire inspection.”

Yeah, well—the damage is done now, isn’t it?” Carlotta snapped.

“I will personally call every booking and explain the situation. This is all my fault—”

“You’re right. It is,” Carlotta said, stone-faced, her eyes locked on Sadie. “You made me look like a fool—hell, you made the entire business look like a joke!”

“I get it. And I’m sorry. But it’s my problem. At the end of the day, Pemberley is my responsibility. It’s my business plan, after all.”

“I thought it was *our* business?” Carlotta pushed away from the table, pain etched into her features.

“It is. You guys are such a huge part of this. It’s just the farm is my family’s legacy,” Sadie said quickly.

“So let me get this straight...it’s *our* business when it’s convenient for you—like when you need to leave town for an audition. But we need to remember our business matters more to you because it’s your family farm. Or at least it is when it fits into your schedule. Did I get that right?” Carlotta folded her arms as she glared at Sadie. “Let’s not forget that Ryleigh is the one who’s up every morning—working her ass off before the sun rises. But that doesn’t matter because it’s not her family business.”

“Of course it matters,” Sadie said. “I didn’t mean—”

“Never mind that this business is only staying afloat because of the online orders that Ryleigh spends hours preparing for the website *I* created and because of your boyfriend’s help in securing a business loan.”

“Car,” Ryleigh said softly. “I know you’re upset but there’s no need—”

“And here it is.” Carlotta waved Ryleigh off, her cutting eyes still on Sadie’s. “If you hadn’t been so goddamn selfish, jetting off to Chicago when we desperately needed you, then



we wouldn't be in this mess." She stood and turned on her high-heeled sandal, stalking toward the swinging kitchen door.

Sadie opened her mouth and quickly shut it, unsure of what to say. Luckily, they were alone so nobody else had bore witness to her humiliating takedown. "I'm so incredibly sorry," she said finally.

"I know you are," Ryleigh said, nodding. "So does Carlotta. She'll come around. She's just really upset about what happened. She didn't tell you but she turned down a singing gig at an LA nightclub to stay and help out this weekend."

"I had no idea," Sadie said quietly. "Why didn't she tell me?"

"Because she could see how important this audition was to you and she loves you too much to let you down."

Sadie swallowed hard. "So she sacrificed her career to step in and cover for me and what do I do?" She threw her hands up, disgusted. "I blow everything because my head was in the clouds. All I could think about was nailing my audition. I put everything and everyone else on the back burner."

*Just like Jameson said.*

Ryleigh squeezed her hand. "You made a mistake. I'm sure Carlotta sees that. We just need to let the dust settle."

"She meant what she said. I *was* selfish. I chose to bail on my responsibilities here. I left everyone in the lurch. And I

made a huge mistake that could jeopardize Pemberley's reputation."

Sadie didn't know if it was possible to die of shame but, at that moment, it felt like it was.

"Everything will work out in the end," Ryleigh said. "We can't give up hope."

"No—we won't. But I need to find a way to make things up to Carlotta. And from now on—no more distractions. No more scheduling auditions when we have something important happening with the farm. I'm sorry I wasn't here when you needed me. But I promise it won't happen again."

Sadie needed her focus back.

And as she sat across from Ryleigh, swallowing the huge lump forming in her throat, Sadie finally knew what had to be done for her to achieve that.

\* \* \*

In the fading evening light, Sadie steered the truck up Jameson's long drive.

The knot in her stomach reminded Sadie of the task she'd set for herself. She hurried up the walkway and, taking a deep breath, pressed the buzzer.

The front door opened and there stood Jameson, looking relaxed and happy in dark jeans and a white button-down with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. The white contrasted nicely

with his bronzed skin and deep green eyes, she thought with a twinge of sadness.

He smiled at Sadie and it caught her off guard, how much she'd missed him. But there it was—that electricity between them.

It just pulled her in, every time he was near.

“Hi,” he said softly.

Jameson moved aside, gesturing for Sadie to come inside.

She'd kept things casual, wearing jeans, a blue tank with a paper-thin white cardigan, and gold flip-flops. When she'd called earlier, Jameson had suggested she come over for dinner. He'd offered to drive into Paola to pick up their favorite Chinese takeout.

“I thought we'd eat in the living room,” he said, motioning toward the sofa and the takeout boxes set out on the coffee table. There was also a bottle of red wine with two glasses.

“That sounds good,” Sadie said. She slid her sandals off and tucked her legs under her on the couch. Jameson started to pour her wine and she said, “Just a small glass, please. And a bottle of water, if you have it.”

“Of course.” Jameson went into the kitchen and returned with an ice-cold bottle of water he handed to Sadie.

“Thank you.”

Sadie felt a little awkward. He was being so nice. It was going to be hard to start the conversation she needed to have

with him.

To keep from talking, she grabbed one of the boxes of Chinese—sweet and sour chicken with rice, her favorite—and began eating. They ate in comfortable silence which suited Sadie fine. She'd always hated being around people who demanded a steady stream of mindless, small talk. Thankfully, that'd never been the case with Jameson.

After a while, Jameson said, "I'm really glad you called, Sadie. I missed you." He set his wine on the coffee table as he looked at her.

"I'm glad I called, too," she said softly, at a loss, as she stared into those mesmerizing eyes.

Sadie had no idea how she was going to say what needed saying. But the time had come to gather her strength. So she set her glass down, resigned to the task before her.

Her stomach tightened. She took a deep breath, stilling her hands in her lap. "Jameson, we need to talk."

He sighed, his easy smile disappearing "Well, that can't be good."

"It's just that I've been thinking in our time apart about my priorities—about where I need to focus my energy right now," she said.

"And I'm guessing that means you don't think I should be one of those priorities." He picked up his wine and chugged the last of it down.

"No," she said quietly. "I don't."

“I see.” Jameson set his empty glass down a little too hard.

“I just—need to focus on Pemberley right now. You were right—what you said about me leaving for the audition—it was selfish to put my friends in that position. We failed the final safety inspection.” She rubbed her temples, which had begun to ache, with her fingers. “And now we have to push back the opening. Because I was too busy worrying about my audition and you and—it was very irresponsible of me. Now Carlotta’s upset and she has every right to be and...I need to do better.”

Jameson listened quietly while she spoke, avoiding her gaze. When she finished, his green eyes probed hers as if he were searching for the right response. “I’m sorry things didn’t go well this weekend. Of course, you should focus on the opening. I’m the one that tried to convince you to skip the audition, remember?”

“I remember,” she said. “And I should’ve listened to you.”

If only she had, maybe the sky wouldn’t have come crashing down around her.

“Okay, well, listen to me now.” Jameson grabbed her hand. “We’re good together. What we have is worth fighting for. So please don’t just walk away. I can give you space. I can help get things ready for the opening. Don’t shut me out.”

“No,” she said firmly, her heart thundering in her ears. She scrambled to her feet, suddenly needing to put distance between them. “I told you I wasn’t ready for a committed relationship. I have too many other things in my life

demanding my attention right now.” Feeling shaky, she wrapped her arms around her middle to steady herself. “This has to be over.”

Jameson got to his feet. “I think you’re running away from this because you’re scared.”

“You’re right,” she said flatly. “I am scared...of letting myself down...of letting Ryleigh and Carlotta down...of letting my family down. And I refuse to do that. So please don’t make this harder than it already is, Jameson.”

Sadie intended to move toward the door but Jameson grabbed her hand. “Don’t go,” he said softly.

“I think it’s for the best. Thank you for dinner.” Before she could stop herself, Sadie leaned in to kiss him. One last time. When their lips parted, she whispered, “Goodbye, Jameson.”

And before she could change her mind, Sadie hurried out the front door, blinking back tears.

# Chapter Eleven



**B**EFORE SADIE KNEW it, a month had slipped by since she'd ended things with Jameson.

But she had to keep moving forward.

She made a point of keeping a strict routine to get her through each day.

Early mornings she assisted Ryleigh with online orders at Porters before she left to teach at the elementary school. Then Sadie packaged and readied the items for shipping. She'd bring lunch from the restaurant back to her grandparents at Pemberley. And after lunch, Sadie focused on preparations for their grand opening.

The fire inspection hurdle was behind them at last. It'd taken a lot of begging and a basket full of Ryleigh's best baked offerings to setup a re-do final safety inspection in a timely fashion. Because the local county inspector's office was notoriously awful about scheduling. But they'd snagged a slot for the middle of September.

And their opening was tentatively set for the first week of October.

The bed-and-breakfast was taking shape and Sadie was finally finding her rhythm. The promise of a fresh start hung in the air.

Construction on the restaurant and main house was complete. The restaurant patio had been outfitted with a bar, a fire pit, and an oval-shaped pool she thought their guests would appreciate.

Grandpa Cliff was back on his feet and, though they urged him to take it easy, he insisted on returning to his normal routine, making the daily rounds on the farm with Mr. Sloane and tending to his morning chores. Grandma Mae would only agree to it if he promised to take the afternoons and evenings off.

Sadie had moved into one of the newly-renovated guest rooms in the main house. And it suited her. Each day, she was up with the sun, slurping down her morning coffee before heading off to Porters.

Yes, life had settled into a nice routine. Keeping busy kept her mind off things she didn't like to think about. And most of the time, it worked.

Except for when it didn't.

\* \* \*

Sadie sat at a table with Ryleigh and Carlotta in Pemberley's restaurant that Ryleigh had decided to name The Barn. She insisted it was just kitschy and off-beat enough to work. Predictably, Carlotta hated the name but Sadie took Ryleigh's



side. The restaurant was her portion of the business to run and, as such, it was only fair she should be the one to name it.

“What time is the next vendor coming?” Carlotta asked, stifling a yawn.

They’d already met with a half-dozen alcohol vendors so far. Sadie’s stomach grumbled, reminding her it was nearly lunchtime.

Ryleigh checked the clipboard in front of her. “Our last vendor should be here any minute for our eleven-thirty appointment.” She smiled apologetically at Carlotta. “I know it’s been a lot but this is the last one. It’s a local winery and I loved the wine I sampled when I went there with my mom a few years ago. Plus, I have a really good feeling about them.”

“We’re just here to give you extra feedback.” Sadie smiled at Ryleigh, folding her hands in front of her.

“And for the free wine,” Carlotta added with a wink.

Since they had a few minutes, Sadie decided to update them on her progress. She cleared her throat. “By the way, everything’s all set for our re-do safety inspection. We should pass with flying colors this time.”

“I guess that means you remembered to schedule the fire inspection,” Carlotta said, examining her pristine manicure. Her voice had an edge to it.

Things were still a little tense between them.

“Already scheduled, executed, and passed.” She said with all the cheerfulness she could muster. “From here on out, it

should be smooth sailing to our grand opening the first weekend in October.”

“That’s the spirit,” Ryleigh said. “Of course it will be. We just hit a small bump but now we’re back on track. Right, Carlotta?” Ryleigh gave Carlotta a pointed look.

Carlotta looked up from her nails. “Sure. Smooth sailing.” She smiled at Ryleigh like a schoolgirl looking for her teacher’s praise after the correct answer.

Sadie decided to change the subject. “So Grandma Mae asked me to invite you all to stay for lunch. She’s heating up leftover lasagna from last night’s dinner. Isn’t that your favorite, Car?”

“I guess I could suffer through some of Grandma Mae’s homemade lasagna.”

Sadie took it as a glimmer of hope that Carlotta’s anger was beginning to thaw.

Her phone buzzed on the table and Sadie picked it up to see Lenora was calling. She excused herself and walked out to the patio.

“Lenora? What’s up?”

“Good news.” Lenora’s happy voice sang out through the phone’s speakers. “You have a call-back.”

“What?” Sadie blinked, processing Lenora’s words. “But—but it’s been weeks. I thought I didn’t get it.”

“Well, another role just opened up and the casting director’s considering you and a few other dancers for it. Apparently, who they had lined up fell through. I think she decided to take a role with a show in London instead.”

“Wow. I—I don’t know what to say, Lenora. I thought I was done with that. And my schedule’s pretty full at the moment. I’m not sure I can make it back to Chicago any time soon.”

“You wouldn’t be heading back to Chicago.”

“What do you mean?”

“The casting director wants you to come to New York. You have two weeks to prepare.”

She sighed. It was everything Sadie had ever dreamed of. And now that it was finally happening, all she could think was what lousy timing it was.

“I don’t know, Lenora. I can’t afford to leave Pemberley right now.”

“Surely, they can do without you for a weekend. A quick plane ride there and back with a one-night hotel stay. A role like this doesn’t come along every day.” Lenora paused. “It’s what you’ve always wanted. Don’t give up on me now.”

“I understand,” Sadie said as Carlotta motioned for her to come back inside. “Let me think about it. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Who was that?” Carlotta asked as Sadie walked back through the open doors.

“That was Lenora, my agent. I got a call-back.”

“When?” Carlotta asked.

“Two weeks. After the final safety inspection. They want me to fly to New York.”

“And what did you say?”

“I told her I would have to think about it. The last thing I want to do is leave you and Ryleigh in the lurch. I won’t go if I can’t figure out how to make it work. I won’t make the same mistake twice.”

“No,” Carlotta said. “You have to go. This is your dream. You’ve waited your whole life to have a New York audition.”

“What about everything you said before?”

Carlotta shook her head. “Forget what I said. I was angry. You have to do this,” she insisted. “We’ll find a way to make it work.”

Are you sure?” Sadie asked, grabbing Carlotta’s hand. “I want to do this call-back more than anything but I won’t put our grand opening in jeopardy.”

“No, you have to go. Maybe you could ask Elijah to step in and help out while you’re gone. Or...”

“Or what?” Sadie asked.

“We could ask Jameson to pitch in. I bet he’d do it. He is our investor after all.”

“He’s a *silent* investor,” Sadie reminded her. “And I would prefer not to involve him in this.”

So you're still avoiding him, then?" Carlotta eyed her thoughtfully. "You never told us exactly why you guys broke up."

Just hearing Jameson's name made her stomach clench. She swallowed hard, trying to compose herself before answering.

"There's nothing to tell. It just...isn't going to work out. We want different things. Besides, I have the farm to think of. That and this dance audition is more than enough to keep me busy. I don't have time for anything else right now."

"If you say so," Carlotta said, letting Sadie drop the issue. "Well, we'd better get back. Our last vendor just arrived and I'm sure Ryleigh is anxious to get started."

"Sure," Sadie said, following Carlotta.

But as she listened to the vendor prattle on, she couldn't shake the gnawing ache in the pit of her stomach. As the haunted thoughts of Jameson that had been plaguing her for weeks pierced her mind.

\* \* \*

At the insistence of her friends, Sadie called Lenora back the next day and told her she would do the audition. Predictably, Lenora was over the moon.

And as she drove to Ms. Audrey's dance studio to get in a few hours of practice, she felt happier than she had in weeks.

She'd just finished helping Ryleigh and Carlotta fill the online orders and it was still early in the morning. Carlotta had insisted on packaging the orders by herself and practically pushed Sadie out the door, telling her to go rehearse instead.

She eased the truck into a parking spot in front of the studio. Ms. Audrey had given her a key so she could let herself in whenever she wanted to practice. Since there were no dance classes scheduled until later in the afternoon, it was the perfect opportunity to prepare her audition piece for the call-back.

As she walked to the door, Sadie rooted around in her bag for the studio key.

“Well, if it isn't Sadie Barnhart.”

Startled, Sadie looked up to see Penelope McDaniels staring back at her with a frosty smile.

She fixed a polite smile on her face. “Good morning, Mrs. McDaniels. If you'll excuse me, I'm in a bit of a rush.” She hurried past her, hoping Penelope would get the message Sadie wasn't in the mood for chit-chat.

“I was sorry to hear that you and Jameson ended things,” Penelope purred. “You must be so heartbroken.”

Sadie stiffened. Before she could stop herself, she turned to face Penelope, giving her a tight smile. “On the contrary, I'm pretty busy these days with more important matters.”

“Yes, I'm sure you are,” Penelope continued. “Jameson told me all about your little audition last month.” Her cold, green eyes twinkled with sick amusement. “I heard Pemberley

failed its safety inspection while you were gone.” She clucked her tongue. “That must’ve been so devastating for you.”

Sadie’s smile froze. “I have no doubt we’ll pass the next one with flying colors.”

“I’m sure you will,” Penelope said, nodding. “Of course... if the farm were to fail again you’d have to push back your opening a second time. What a shame that would be! It could really set you back.” She leaned in as if they were old friends sharing secrets. “It might even keep people away. You really can’t put a price tag on peace of mind when it comes to safety.” She winked conspiratorially as Sadie fought the instinct to spit in her overly-Botoxed face.

“As I said, I’m sure we’ll do just fine, ma’am,” she said stiffly. “Give my best to your family.” She turned to unlock the door of Ms. Audrey’s studio.

“If you did happen to fail the inspection a second time, I dare say Pemberley might never recover.”

With every fiber of her being, Sadie held her composure, unwilling to let Penelope get the best of her. This was her farm, her legacy, and she wouldn’t let anyone undermine it.

“Thank you for your concern, Penelope. But I have everything under control.”

Penelope smiled brightly. “Well, just remember, my offer to take the farm off your hands still stands.” Then she walked briskly away, her kitten heels clicking against the pavement.

And all Sadie could do was stand there, shaking with rage, as she watched Penelope's elegant form disappear inside the bank.

\* \* \*

A week later, Sadie was preparing for bed. She went through her normal skin care regimen—cleansing, toning, and moisturizing her face—before brushing her teeth. Sadie found the ritual incredibly relaxing. The repetitive tasks busied her hands and allowed her mind to decompress as she scrolled through the events of the day, categorizing and filing the information away.

She flipped off the bathroom light before returning to her room, intending to flop into bed after a long, tiring day. Sadie wasn't sure what compelled her to go to the window, but that's where she found herself a moment later.

Pushing open the lacy lavender curtains, she expected the calmness of the night sky and the beauty of the farm landscape to soothe and send her off to a peaceful dreamland.

Instead, Sadie's eyes widened in horror as she caught a glimpse of the bright, orange glow and haze of smoke coming from The Barn.

Before her brain could catch up, Sadie took off running down the short flight of stairs, barely pausing to shove her feet into the boots she kept by the front door, before rushing outside.

Her brain struggled to process as she ran.



How could this be happening?

What would it mean for their opening that was merely weeks away?

She didn't have the answers.

All she knew was she needed to get to the restaurant—she had to see it up close to believe it was real.

Sadie slowed her feet as she came closer to the blaze. A fit of coughing overtook her as the thick, black smoke invaded her lungs. She hunched at the waist, resting her hands on flannel pajama-clad knees, as she hacked up the wretched smoke. Rising to her full height, she covered her mouth and nose with her flannel sleeve, eyes tearing up from the fiery haze.

Standing there, watching the restaurant engulfed in angry flames that seemed to leap out in every direction, Sadie realized she'd left her phone in the house.

She needed to call the fire department. Wake her grandparents. Do something to help. But all she could do was stand there, watching everything they'd worked so hard to achieve go up in the cruelest puff of smoke.

She didn't fight the angry tears streaming down her face. Sadie couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so small, so helpless.

“Sadie! Sadie!”

Someone was calling her name from a distance but she couldn't tear her eyes away from the fire.

She stood there, transfixed—her mind racing.

“Sadie, thank God you’re okay,” she heard her grandmother say as she came to stand beside her. “Grandpa saw the fire. We’ve already called the fire department. Mr. Sloane called the farmhands. They’ll all be here shortly.” She put her arm around Sadie’s waist. “Come on, let’s move back. We shouldn’t be this close to the fire. There’s nothing to be done except to let the professionals do their job.” She spoke in a hushed, soothing tone as if she were trying to comfort Sadie.

As if such a thing were possible.

But try as she might, Sadie couldn’t tear her eyes away from the blaze.

Her dry throat refused to let her speak. All she could do was nod and let Grandma Mae steer her from the fire. They walked a fair distance toward the main house and the further away they moved, the easier it was to breathe.

Within minutes, bodies swarmed the farm like it was an ant hill—all talking excitedly and frantically hurrying about.

Grandpa Cliff and Mr. Sloane conversed with the farm hands while a firetruck, sirens blaring and lights flashing, descended upon them and firefighters charged toward the blazing fire.

Sadie found she could do nothing but stand beside her grandmother and watch the action unfold, her stomach knotted, her eyes filling.

At some point, a firefighter placed a heavy, gray blanket around her shoulders. She found the weight of it oddly comforting as she hugged it close to her body.

She finally looked over at her grandmother and noted someone had also given her a blanket which she wore over her blue robe as she stared stoically at the fire.

Words seemed pointless as they watched the men work to control the inferno.

Sadie couldn't be sure how much time had passed, but after a while, the firefighters managed to extinguish the flames. Leaving only the ashen, charred remains of what had once been a colorful dining area full of promise.

“Dad works with the volunteer firefighters in town. We heard what happened from my mom and rushed over.” Ryleigh's voice called out to Sadie but she couldn't be sure if it was real.

It all felt like a dream. Like she was outside her body watching it happen to someone else.

“We got here as soon as we could,” Carlotta said.

Something inside Sadie snapped, bringing her back to herself as she looked around, saw her friends for the first time.

They enveloped Sadie in their supportive arms as she stood, transfixed, watching the last embers of the fire fade into the air. Her head throbbed just thinking about all that had been lost.

How would they ever recover?

\* \* \*

The next morning, Sadie sat on the front porch swing, an untouched cup of coffee in her lap, as she absentmindedly propelled the swing back and forth with her bare feet.

She'd found it impossible to sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, all she could see was the blazing inferno.

Finally giving up, she'd wandered downstairs to make coffee, thinking the caffeine might help jolt her brain out of its haze. Then she'd headed outside, watched the sun come up.

But even a beautiful sunrise wasn't enough to lift her spirits.

Her mind looped over last night's events—playing the scene on continuous repeat.

Sadie had no idea how long she'd been sitting on the porch swing when she saw Grandpa Cliff walking up the front steps.

He smiled brightly. "Just out for my morning walk. Your grandmother gave me orders to collect you for breakfast. She's making your favorite blueberry pancakes." He settled beside her on the porch swing.

"Thanks but I'm not hungry," she said, her eyes fixed on the sunny yellow mug between her palms.

"You know your grandmother doesn't take no for an answer. She's the stubborn sort. Much like yourself," Grandpa Cliff said warmly.

“I wish I could be more like her,” Sadie said softly. “She’s always been so unshakable.”

“So are you,” Grandpa said. “But I reckon this has been quite a shock. Give yourself some time. You’ll bounce back—good as new.”

“And what about everything the fire destroyed?”

“These things take time. Don’t lose hope, Sadie girl. Pemberley’s always been stronger than she looks. I put my faith in her.” He patted her arm. “And I put my faith in you.”

Sadie shook her head. “I don’t know, Grandpa. My track record doesn’t look so good.”

“Poppycock,” Grandpa Cliff said. “Life’s thrown you some curves but you’ve always managed to keep on fighting through the hard parts. This is just another one. It’ll bend and stretch—but it won’t break you. You’ll see.”

“I admire your optimism. I could use a healthy dose of it this morning.” He’d always had a way of making her feel better about things.

“Good, that’s what I’m here for. Now, enough of this moping and wallowing. It never did nobody no good to sit around wishing they could undo the past. What’s done is done. We got to focus on what’s right in front of our faces.”

“And what’s that?” Sadie asked with a wry smile.

“First, it’s a big ol’ stack of your grandma’s pancakes. Life always looks better on a full stomach.”

“And what comes after that?” Sadie asked, her spirits lifting just a fraction.

“We call the insurance adjuster and start rebuilding. She’ll be good as new a couple months from now, mark my words.”

“A couple of months?” Sadie sighed, setting her coffee on the wicker table beside the swing. “What about the opening? And all the bookings we’ve already lined up for next month?” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I just don’t know if I can face it. We’ve already had to reschedule once after failing the first safety inspection...why would anyone ever consider coming to Pemberley if we have to put them off again?”

“That’s on them if they don’t want to come back. All you can do is be honest and let them make their decision,” said Grandpa Cliff. “There’ll be other customers.” He stood, extending his hand to Sadie.

She shoved her bare feet into the sneakers she’d dropped in front of the wicker table before taking Grandpa Cliff’s hand. “I’ve decided not to do the New York audition after all.”

“I wouldn’t make a hasty decision after one bad night. Talk to the girls. I bet Elijah would step in for a few days so you can go.”

“I appreciate that, Grandpa. But this is my project—my idea. I have to finish what I started. It would be irresponsible of me to rush off now and leave everyone to fill in the gaps.”

“We could manage for a few days without you,” he said, squeezing her hand.

“But that’s just it...if I land the part, it wouldn’t be a few days. It would be a six to nine-month run. I was being stupid and selfish to even consider it. I’ve been up all night thinking.”

“Well, that just proves you need to sleep on it before you change your plans. As for landing the part, well, there’s no need to count our chickens before they hatch. We’ll deal with it when we have to.”

“Still, I think I should let Lenora know my decision.”

“Promise me you’ll give it at least a good night’s sleep before you do anything,” said Grandpa Cliff.

She sighed. “Fine. If it’ll make you happy, I’ll wait.”

Though she doubted anything would change her mind.

“Yes, it will make me happy. Speaking of happy, what happened with you and that McDaniels’ fella?”

“I guess Grandma Mae told you we broke up.”

“She told me enough of the broad strokes but I’d like to hear a bit more from you.”

“It just...wasn’t a good fit,” Sadie said, her eyes focused on the trail as they walked toward her grandparents’ apartment.

“What didn’t fit about it?”

“We wanted different things. Besides, I need to focus on Pemberley right now. I can’t afford any unnecessary distractions.”

“I see,” Grandpa Cliff said. “I reckon he made you happy though, didn’t he?”

“I guess so—yeah, I was happy enough.”

“The way I see it...happiness is always worth the distraction. And in life, you won’t meet too many folks that can make you happy. I got lucky with my Mae. She makes me about as happy as catching a monster of a trout out fishing on a Saturday.”

Sadie smiled. Few things made Grandpa Cliff as happy as when he was fishing for trout. “I do want to find what you have with Grandma Mae—eventually. Just not right now.”

“Sadie girl, don’t you know life doesn’t give a rat’s tail about our plans? Don’t be too hasty letting this one go. Seems to me, you two just got your wires crossed. Maybe you should give him a call.”

“I appreciate the advice, Grandpa, but with everything else going on, I just don’t want to deal with that right now.”

“You never know. Maybe you’ll change your mind,” he said.

But as they walked into her grandparents’ kitchen, Sadie was all too happy to drop the subject of Jameson McDaniels.

\* \* \*

Sadie did at least follow Grandpa Cliff’s advice about getting a good night’s sleep. She finally slept—or rather she collapsed



on top of her comforter—after being awake for a straight thirty-six hours.

But when she awoke early the next morning, Sadie still didn't see how she could leave town when there was so much work to be done. She decided to call Lenora and let her know she'd be staying in Fontana.

It felt like the right thing to do, given their current situation.

Pushing back the colorful quilt, she slid out of bed, feeling a little better about things than she had the day before. She jumped into the shower, relishing the feel of hot water against her skin.

A half-hour later, she was showered and dressed in leggings and sneakers for a morning walk around the farm. She dried her long hair and braided it down her back before fixing her favorite blue Chicago Cubs cap on her head.

The air had turned crisper as the long, summer days faded into fall.

Sadie loved this time of year when the leaves fell—blanketing the ground in a cacophony of colors and crunching under her feet. The faint smell of smoke singed the air, undoubtedly left over from the fire.

But today, with nature's beauty surrounding her, Sadie didn't mind the smell so much. In fact, she rather enjoyed the added effect. Her spirits lifted as she stood on her back porch.

She closed her eyes and took a moment to appreciate the cool breeze on her face.

“Sadie?”

Sadie froze, her eyes flying open. “Jameson?” she whispered, somewhat in denial that he was actually standing there. “What—what are you doing here?”

“I knocked on the front door first but nobody answered.” He held up both hands. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I just—heard what happened the other night. And I wanted to stop by and check on you.”

“I see.” She stared at the leaves, collected at the base of the steps. Not trusting herself enough to hold his gaze. Her emotions might betray her.

“Ryleigh told me.”

“Of course.”

It had been weeks since she’d last seen him. She hadn’t expected it to hurt this much. But there it was—her broken heart.

A self-inflicted wound that refused to heal.

“I just wanted to make sure you were doing okay,” Jameson said quietly, taking a step toward Sadie. “How are you holding up?”

“Good—well, better today, at least.”

“Do they know what caused the fire?”

“I haven’t heard anything yet. I still can’t understand how it happened. I mean, the restaurant just passed its fire inspection. We were a few days away from our second final safety inspection and then this happens?” Sadie shook her head. “It just doesn’t make any sense.”

“These things don’t always make sense. But I’ll feel better about it once we receive the fire inspector’s report. Have you contacted your insurance?”

“My grandparents contacted them yesterday. I wasn’t in any kind of shape to handle it.” She hugged her arms to her body to keep them occupied. It felt unnatural to be so close to Jameson and not touch him.

“I’ll bet,” he said softly. “I wish you would have called me yourself and told me what happened.”

“It just didn’t seem like the right time…” Her voice trailed off as her eyes met his, all the feelings she’d worked so hard to bury fighting their way to the surface.

Jameson smiled. “We said we’d try to be friends, didn’t we?”

She shrugged. “People say that but does anyone ever actually stay friends after a break-up?”

“I hope they do,” he said. “At least, I hope that we will.”

She nodded. “I’d like that, too.”

A few months ago, if someone had told her she’d be standing here, wanting to be friends with Jameson McDaniels, Sadie would’ve said they’d lost a few marbles. But now, he’d

become such a big part of her life in such a short time, it was hard to imagine him not being around.

Maybe they could do this. Maybe they could be friends. Maybe then the gnawing ache in the pit of her stomach would finally go away.

He held her gaze for one heart-stopping moment before clearing his throat. “In the spirit of friendship, I came here to tell you I spoke with the contractors who renovated the barn. It’s a company I use often so the owner’s a good friend of mine. Anyway, he says they can have the rebuild done in a few weeks.”

“A few weeks?” Sadie blinked as she stared at him. “I was told it would probably be at least a month or two before they could have it done. We were going to move the opening to December—just in time for Christmas.”

“Now you won’t have to wait that long. They should have it finished by the middle of October. The owner’s calling in extra crew to get it done as a personal favor to me.”

“Mid-October,” Sadie said as she turned the details over in her mind. “We’d still have to refurnish it...some of those pieces were one of a kind. It would be a tall order to get everything ready in time.”

But...it could work, she decided as tiny blossoms of hope seeded inside her heart.

“I already spoke with Carlotta about that and she’s on it. Ryleigh said she’ll get in touch with the vendors to restock her

supplies. The insurance money should reimburse you for the extra expense.” Jameson folded his arms, leveling his gaze at her. “So you have no reason not to go to your New York audition this weekend.”

Her mouth flew open. “How did you—of course, Ryleigh or Carlotta probably told you.”

She didn’t know how she felt about that. She didn’t mind his knowing—exactly. But it was her news to share. Not her friends.

“Don’t be upset. They were just worried about you.”

“Look, Jameson, I appreciate you stopping by to check on me but it’s my business,” Sadie said, suddenly feeling weary.

She didn’t have the strength to fight with him.

“I’m just here to talk to you as a friend,” he said, throwing his hands up again, in surrender. “I meant no offense. I just wanted to tell you myself about the rebuild. You’re right, the audition is your business. But this is what you’ve worked for your whole life.”

She sighed. “It’s complicated. You—wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me,” he said, folding his arms as he regarded her with thoughtful eyes.

“If I get the part I’d have to be in New York for the run of the show. We’re talking six to nine months. It just doesn’t feel like a good time to leave. Pemberley is too important to me.”

“What did your grandparents say?”

“That I should go to New York and we’d figure the rest of it out.”

“So what’s the problem?”

Sadie shook her head. “It’s just not that simple.”

“So explain it to me,” Jameson said. “Why can’t you go?”

“It—it’s my fault we’ve had all these problems with the opening. I’ve been...unfocused because of my big audition—and because of you,” she said quietly.

He watched her closely, listening, his expression guarded.

“And now with the fire...I think it’s a sign. That I need to stay and be here for my grandparents. Like they were there for me and my brother all those years ago when my parents died. I can’t let them down. It would kill me to watch them lose the farm. They don’t deserve that and I refuse to be the cause of their pain. Because I needed to go off and fulfill some big dream while everyone I love bears the brunt of that decision?” Sadie shook her head. “No. No, I won’t do that to them.”

Jameson stroked his chin as he stared at Sadie. And the familiarity of it made her heart ache. But he was part of the reason she was in this mess to begin with. If she hadn’t gotten distracted—hadn’t gone off and played house with him—then maybe none of this would’ve happened.

She wondered if she would’ve even done the Chicago audition in the first place. Part of her thought she’d done it just to spite him. Because he told her not to go.

God, she could be so stubborn sometimes—even to her own detriment.

Sadie cleared her throat. “I should get going but I appreciate you stopping by.”

“You’re using the farm as an excuse to stay here and hide,” Jameson said.

Anger surged through her and against her better judgment, Sadie spat out, “It’s none of your business.”

“If you don’t do this audition. You’ll always regret it. Always look back and wonder what could have been. Believe me, I know.”

“No, what I regret is getting involved with you in the first place. It was a huge mistake that I can never take back.” Her voice quivered, betraying her.

Jameson flinched visibly as if Sadie had slapped him. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” he finally said.

Filled with remorse, Sadie sighed. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, if it’s how you feel you have every right to say it.” Jameson locked his eyes on hers, pain etched in them.

“Still, it was wrong to just blurt it out like that. My head is all over the place right now. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. Message received. You want things between us to be over. But I think you’re lying to yourself. You’re hurting and looking for somewhere to hang the blame.”

“No, the blame is on me. I take full responsibility for my reckless—”

“Reckless? So I was just some reckless summer fling?”

“I didn’t mean it that way. I just...” She seemed to be making things worse no matter how hard she tried to remove her foot from her mouth.

Jameson let out a long sigh as he dragged a hand through his golden hair. “Look, it’s a bad time. I get it. Maybe we shouldn’t do this right now.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Sadie said, biting down hard on her lower lip, fighting the urge to cry.

“I just came by to check on you and to let you know about the contractors,” he said in a formal tone.

“I appreciate that,” Sadie said.

“They can start tomorrow if that works for you?” He refused to look at her as he spoke.

It was like a dagger through her heart.

“That’ll be just fine,” Sadie said, returning his formal tone.

“Okay, then,” Jameson said. “See you around, Sadie.”

The same thing he’d said on her first day back in Fontana.

She watched him walk away, haunted by his words.



# Chapter Twelve



**A**FTER DINNER WITH her grandparents, Sadie considered a long, bubble bath.

However, an unexpected knock at the door changed her plans.

Running to open it, Sadie saw her two best friends standing there, wearing matching grins.

“We brought champagne.” Carlotta held up the expensive-looking bottle for appraisal.

“And your favorite pastries,” Ryleigh said, her blonde curls bouncing around her face as her green eyes gleamed with excitement. She carried a large pastry box bearing the Porters logo.

“I was going for a soak in the tub and some self-loathing... but this works, too.” Grinning, Sadie held the door open for her friends to enter.

“Skip the loathing. Reserve the bath for after you’re stuffed with pastries and the good stuff.” Carlotta wiggled the champagne bottle.

When they were seated in the family room, on the antique cream-colored sofa covered in tiny blue flowers, Ryleigh set the pastry box on the mahogany coffee table that Carlotta had found at a local flea market. She pulled out a pastry buried beneath a mountain of chocolate icing and handed it to Sadie. “Just take a bite of this. I promise it’ll chase all your blues away.”

Sadie obediently took a bite of the decadent dessert Ryleigh held out. An explosion of soft, sweet pastry with a burst of chocolate goodness flooded her mouth. She murmured in appreciation. Unable to speak, she pointed at the pastry.

“It’s some of my finest work if I do say so myself,” Ryleigh said, her pretty green eyes dancing.

Carlotta rolled her eyes. “She says that about all her creations.”

“They’re like my children,” Ryleigh said, cutting eyes at Carlotta. “I could never choose a favorite.”

“And on that note, I’m off to get glasses so we can get into this bad boy,” Carlotta said, motioning toward the champagne.

Ryleigh handed Sadie a napkin from the box to set her pastry on.

“This is just what I needed.”

“I’m glad,” Ryleigh patted Sadie’s knee. “That’s what we’re here for.”

“And this,” Carlotta said, walking back into the sitting room, carrying three tall flute glasses, “is just what the doctor

ordered.”

She used the opener she brought with her from the kitchen to uncork the champagne. When it popped, she filled the glasses to the brim, handing each of them one.

Sadie took a small sip, the bubbles tickling her nose. And she had to admit Carlotta knew her stuff.

“So, I gather this dark mood of yours has something to do with the fire.” Carlotta sipped from her glass, eyeing Sadie.

“She doesn’t have to talk about it if she doesn’t want to.” Ryleigh shot Carlotta a look.

Sadie sighed as she set her glass on the table and picked up her pastry. She took another bite, chewing thoughtfully. “Yes, I’m still upset about the fire—among other things.”

“Would those other things include a handsome land developer who also happens to be our silent partner?” Carlotta selected a cream horn for herself from the pastry box.

Sadie took another bite, debating if she wanted to rehash her conversation with Jameson from that morning. She decided it might make her feel better to talk it out with her friends.

“I saw him today actually,” she said, though it came out a little muffled because her mouth was filled with pastry.

“Jameson stopped by?” Ryleigh asked brightly. “I know he was worried about you after I told him about the fire. He said he might be able to speed up the rebuild. Did he tell you about it?”

“He told me,” she said.

Just thinking about their conversation made her feel awful all over again. She stuffed the last of the pastry into her mouth and reached for her glass. Best to numb the bad feelings away, Sadie decided, taking a long swig of champagne.

“And clearly things went swimmingly,” Carlotta said dryly, as she shot Ryleigh a look.

“It was—fine, I guess, for our first meeting post-breakup.” Sadie reached into the pastry box and grabbed a chocolate éclair. Bringing it to her mouth, she took a bite.

“Can you give us a little more than ‘fine’,” Carlotta said, wiping her mouth daintily with a napkin.

“Car,” Ryleigh said softly.

“No, it’s okay,” Sadie said. “I can talk about it.” She took another bite of the éclair, giving herself a minute to think. “It wasn’t a big deal until...”

“Until what?” Carlotta pressed.

Sadie sighed. “I told him it was a mistake to get involved with him this summer.”

“Oh,” Ryleigh said, pressing her lips together. She reached for her champagne and took a small sip. “How did he take it?”

Sadie shrugged. “About as well as you’d expect. He looked like I’d punched him in the gut.”

“Didn’t you?” Carlotta wisely took a long swig of champagne.

“Hey, it was a poor choice of words. I admit it. But it doesn’t change the fact that he’s part of the reason I lost my focus this summer. I got carried away and look at everything that happened because of it.” She bit off another massive piece of éclair. But the sugary goodness did little to undo the knots in her stomach.

“You’re entitled to the way you feel,” Ryleigh said. “He can’t blame you for that.”

Sadie made a noncommittal sound and chugged the last of her champagne. “It’s funny but if you would’ve told me before I came back home that Jameson McDaniels was capable of feelings I wouldn’t have believed you.”

“Don’t most humans have feelings?” Carlotta popped the last bite of her crème horn into her mouth, eyeing Sadie.

“But that’s just it. I never saw him as human. When I first came home, he was a terrible nuisance. And then things... evolved. But I guess I still saw him as someone incapable of feelings.”

Ryleigh nodded. “Well, that’s understandable. He was always so mean when we were growing up. But he was different in college. After his injury, I mean. He was a changed man. Personally, I’ve always believed everyone deserves a second chance.”

“I know he’s changed,” Sadie murmured, reaching into the pastry box. She placed another éclair on her napkin as her two best friends stared at her. “What?”

“That’s your third pastry,” Carlotta said.

“Yeah, so?” Sadie said, feeling defensive. “I just need some comfort food.”

Ryleigh pressed her lips together. “But...you hate eating a lot of sugar, especially at night.”

“You always preach to us about it,” Carlotta said, arching one perfect eyebrow.

“I’m allowed to eat sugar if I want to,” Sadie said, growing irritated. “I’m a goddamn adult and for once I wish everyone would trust that I can make up my own mind about something!”

But they were right. She never ate huge amounts of sugar like this. As a dancer, she knew better than to sabotage her body.

“Of course you can.” Ryleigh’s green eyes shone with concern. “But—it’s just that—you’re not acting like yourself.”

Feeling flushed, Sadie brought a hand to her forehead. “It’s really hot in here. Do you guys feel hot?”

She went to the nearest window, threw open the cobalt blue curtains, then raised the pane to let in the cool air. Much better, she thought, as she inhaled greedy gulps of night air and closed her eyes, trying to steady herself. Honestly, she felt a little woozy.

Probably from all the sugar.

“Eating all those pastries washed down with champagne didn’t do you any favors,” Carlotta said dryly.

“It’s not just that,” she said, briefly closing her eyes before facing her friends.

“You’ve been through a lot,” Ryleigh said. “The breakup. The upcoming audition. And that awful fire. It’s certainly understandable.”

“You’re in love with him,” Carlotta said, matter-of-factly.

“What?” Sadie shook her head. “No. That’s crazy.”

But even as she said the words, they didn’t ring true, not even to her own ears.

“No, you are.” Carlotta poured herself more champagne. “Look at you. You’re a mess.”

“Yeah, I’m a mess because of everything that went wrong on the farm while I was busy being selfish.” Her heart pounded and she placed a hand over it, forcing herself to take a deep breath.

“I don’t think that’s why you feel like crap,” Carlotta took a sip of champagne. “You’re not a stranger to terrible things happening. You’ve always been remarkably strong—still are, in fact. Nothing fazes you for long. You always come up with a plan. But I’ve never seen you all emotional like this. You have one bad conversation with Jameson and suddenly you’re falling to pieces? It’s love,” she repeated, staring at her hot-pink manicure.

Sadie opened her mouth and quickly closed it, not knowing what to say.

“Look, we’re not here to gang up on you,” Ryleigh said, shaking her head at Carlotta. “You’re entitled to feel however you feel.”

Ryleigh, ever the peacemaker. Always kind, thoughtful, and loyal. She’d never had to second guess how much Ryleigh loved her. It was a fact as familiar to Sadie as the back of her hand. And Carlotta, with her spiciness and thirst for life, so opposite of Ryleigh but just as fiercely devoted and protective. These were the two people that probably knew her best outside of her grandparents and Elijah.

Shouldn’t she consider there might be some truth to Carlotta’s words?

Sadie sighed. “I—I don’t know what I feel. I don’t think I’ve ever actually been in love before. But today was...awful, seeing Jameson...I thought I was holding it together pretty well until he showed up. It—undid me.”

“All the classic symptoms,” Carlotta said with a wink. “Happens to the best of us.”

“And how many times have you been in love exactly?” Sadie asked.

“Quite a lot, actually. I happen to think it’s extremely important to fall in love as often as possible,” Carlotta said, grinning. “But in my case, the love affairs are short-lived. But they are so much fun while they last.”



“I’m not sure that counts as being in love, Car,” Ryleigh said softly. “When you’re truly in love, I think you just know. Like a bolt of lightning, it hits you and you’re forever changed. And if you’re lucky enough, you have that person’s love in return.” Ryleigh blushed, staring down at her folded hands in her lap.

“Wow,” Sadie said, “That was...”

“Well said,” Carlotta finished, saluting Ryleigh with her glass of champagne. “I must confess now that Ryleigh has put it so eloquently—no, I’ve never actually been ‘in love’ but I do enjoy the vetting process.” She grinned mischievously at her friends.

Sadie rolled her eyes. “Of course you do. You’re young and gorgeous and there’s no reason why you should settle down yet.”

“Precisely,” Carlotta said, taking a sip of champagne. “Unless he’s the right man.” She pressed her lips together as she stared at Sadie.

“I can’t be in love with Jameson!” Sadie exploded. “It would never work.”

“Why not?” Ryleigh asked.

She sighed. “I have too much on my plate.”

“That’s why we’re here,” said Carlotta. “We can help you make some room.”

“My grandparents think I should do the New York call-back. But if I get the part it means I’ll be in New York

indefinitely.” She pressed her fingertips to her eyelids as her head began to throb. “I just don’t see how Jameson fits into that scenario.”

“But you’re miserable trying to fight the way you feel about him,” Ryleigh said. “Don’t you think you should share all of this with Jameson before you decide it’s over?”

“I just—can’t keep my balance when he’s around,” Sadie said softly.

“Sometimes falling in love means losing your balance.” Ryleigh smiled wistfully.

Sadie turned back toward the open window, letting the cool breeze bathe her hot skin as she blinked back tears.

They were right, of course.

But Sadie still couldn’t bring herself to admit it. Not to them and especially not to Jameson.

It would change everything.

She had a big decision to make about New York. And she couldn’t afford to be off-balance. Not when her life already felt like it was spinning out of control.

She needed to clear her head and focus on the future. The future of Pemberley. The future of her dance career. And those two things didn’t leave much room for a future with Jameson.

She whirled around to face her friends. “I’ve made my decision.”

“About what?” Carlotta asked.

“I’m doing the call-back.”

\* \* \*

The following Saturday morning, Sadie went through her warm-up stretches backstage at the Broadway theater, waiting for her name to be called.

She’d flown in yesterday afternoon, spent the night at the Four Seasons—it was, honestly, the nicest hotel she’d ever been inside—and after this morning’s audition, she’d catch a flight back to Kansas City.

Sadie executed a set of scissor kicks, pulling each leg to her forehead after she kicked them up. Feeling sufficiently stretched, Sadie moved to the mirror and did a final check. She’d opted for a sapphire-blue leotard under her silky white skirt with matching white tights and her prized pair of ballet slippers—all stretched out and perfectly fitted. Her red hair was slicked into a bun. Her makeup, painstakingly applied that morning, was still in place though she opted to freshen her red lipstick.

Perfect, Sadie decided, staring at the overall effect in the mirror. Now all she had to do was take the stage and knock the director’s socks off.

No big deal or anything.

Just her lifelong dream hanging in the balance. This may be her only chance to land a New York job.

“So don’t screw it up,” Sadie muttered under her breath.

A young woman with neat, shoulder-length blonde hair appeared at the stage door. “Are you Sadie?” she asked.

Sadie nodded. “Yes,” she said, putting a friendly smile on her face.

The woman nodded curtly, all business. “They’re ready for you now.”

Taking a deep breath, Sadie followed the woman through the stage door. She motioned toward the stage, indicating where Sadie would enter.

Nervous butterflies fluttering in her stomach, Sadie positioned her hands at her side and strode onto the stage as gracefully as possible. Once she hit her mark down center, Sadie afforded her audience—cloaked in darkness—a slight dip of her head, acknowledging their presence.

When the music started that Lenora had sent ahead to the casting director on her behalf, Sadie’s body took over and it was a welcomed relief to lose herself in the dance she’d practiced feverishly the past week.

She executed an elegant arabesque, carefully extending her limbs to create a seamless line that ran the length of her body. Then Sadie launched into a series of pirouettes across the stage, ending the sequence with a sauté arabesque. She lost herself in the music as she moved across the stage in a combination of arabesques and pirouettes, extending her limbs and letting the movements take on a life all their own.

Out of nowhere, the horrible fire at Pemberley popped into her mind. It startled her so much she fumbled the landing on her arabesque.

Training and experience told her to move on as if it had never happened. But the mistake left her shaken up. Her heart thundered in her ears—so loud she wondered if her audience could hear.

The sweat dripped down her face as she used every ounce of energy she had to power through the rest of the dance. It proved to be a more difficult task than she'd anticipated as she moved into the finale.

A leap into the air with her arms splayed out elegantly to the side and legs holding a split formation. It was a complicated movement to hold for an extended period but Sadie had performed it before. Hundreds of times.

It was beautiful yet simplistic in its execution when done correctly.

As Sadie built momentum to propel herself into the air, images flooded her mind. The Barn burning while she helplessly watched. That last tense exchange with Jameson after the fire. Her nasty run-in with Penelope when she'd warned Sadie about failing the safety inspection a second time.

And the cost of it all took its toll.

Her head was spinning and spinning as the emotions drowned her senses.

The next thing she knew, Sadie missed her footing and instead of taking off in flight, she tumbled to the hard floor. She lay splayed out on the cold stage as the music ended.

There was no coming back from this.

She'd completely botched her audition.

An awkward silence filled the auditorium and Sadie cleared her throat as she scrambled to her feet. She mumbled a quick thank you and walked off-stage, head bowed in embarrassment.

*So this is how a dream dies*, she thought miserably.

\* \* \*

Sadie furiously scrubbed at the kitchen counters, convinced she would never get them clean enough to suit her.

She'd raged a full-on cleaning rampage ever since she'd awakened after spending Saturday night mostly tossing and turning until the early hours. She couldn't seem to turn off her overactive brain.

It insisted on replaying her New York humiliation on repeat.

So she decided to put that relentless energy to work and thus a cleaning spree was born. She'd already cleaned the upstairs and downstairs bathrooms as well as her bedroom. Now she was tackling the kitchen then she'd move on to the parlor, the family room, and the downstairs study.

Too engrossed in bleaching every inch of counter surface, Sadie didn't hear the knocking at the back door. And when Grandpa Cliff walked into the kitchen, she damn near jumped out of her skin.

“Good morning,” he said brightly. “A cleaning spree, huh?” Her grandfather stroked his freshly-shaven chin.

Sadie removed her hot pink vinyl gloves and set them on the counter, pressing a hand to her heart. “You startled me.”

Clearly,” Grandpa Cliff said, crystal blue eyes twinkling. “It's barely seven in the morning. How long have you been at this?”

“Oh, I don't know,” she said, turning away so she could avoid his probing gaze. She washed her hands in the sink and dried them on the blue hand towel hanging from the oven handle. “A few hours? I think I got started around four. I just want to make sure we're in tip-top shape for the opening.”

“I see,” he said quietly. “How about brewing us up some coffee and taking a few beats to chat with your favorite grandpa.”

Sadie smiled as she grabbed the coffee pot and proceeded to fill it with water from the sink. “You know you're my only living grandpa. I'm not sure it counts that you're my favorite since you don't have any competition.” She turned to look at him over her shoulder.

“A win by default still counts as a win,” he said, patting the kitchen chair beside him. “Let that brew. You come sit a

spell.”

Sadie finished adding the coffee grounds to the machine and pressed the start button before obliging her grandfather by sitting in the chair he’d pulled out. They sat in silence for a few minutes. She sensed Grandpa Cliff was waiting for her to volunteer information.

He finally cleared his throat. “I seem to remember a young girl who once got an F on her math test and spent the entire weekend rearranging her bedroom furniture after she’d scrubbed every inch of it clean as penance for said bad grade.”

“Anyone I know?” she asked glumly, resting her head in her hands on the table. “She sounds like a real headcase.”

“She has her moments,” Grandpa Cliff said, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. “What happened?”

Sadie sighed—so deeply, she felt the release all the way to her bones.

“I take it your audition didn’t go well.”

She shrugged. “I choked. My first big break—maybe my only chance at a New York job—and I landed on my ass.”

“I see,” Grandpa Cliff said, brows furrowed. He steepled his fingers on the table in front of him. “Coffee’s ready. Go pour us some.”

She rose from the table and went to the cupboard, pulling out two of her grandmother’s mugs, a matching set with pretty blue flowers, then reached for the coffee pot and filled each



mug. She grabbed the creamer from the fridge, added some to each before dumping in a generous spoonful of sugar.

Sadie carried the coffee back to the table, careful not to spill any on the freshly-mopped floor. She handed Grandpa Cliff his, then sat with hers. Taking a sip, she relished the sugar-laden caffeine as it hit her system, making her feel instantly better—which is why her grandfather had probably suggested the coffee.

He knew her too well.

“So you messed up the audition,” Grandpa Cliff said, sipping his coffee. “Looks to me like the sun’s still shining.”

“This was important to me, Grandpa.” She rubbed her eyelids with her fingertips, the lack of sleep finally catching up to her. Reaching for her mug, she took a long drink, letting the rich, velvety goodness soothe her. “I basically sabotaged my entire dance future in one fell swoop.”

“To make mistakes is to be human,” said her grandfather. “What matters most is what we do afterwards. Don’t hang up your fancy dancing shoes just yet. My money’s on you to find your way out of this.”

Sadie smiled ruefully. “It was so humiliating. I’ve done not-so-great at auditions before but nothing like this. I’m afraid to hear what Lenora’s going to say when she finds out.” She took another sip, hoping to swallow her sorrows in the process.

“There’ll be other auditions. Other opportunities. No use crying over what’s been done. It’s over now. Question is... what’ll you do next?”

Sadie nodded. “I’ve already thought of that. I’m staying here and devoting myself to seeing that our opening goes off without a hitch. No more hiccups. I may be a failure as a professional dancer but it doesn’t mean I still can’t save Pemberley.”

Grandpa Cliff picked up his coffee and took a long drink. He pointed at the cup. “This is really good.”

“It’s my special recipe. Lots of cream and sugar,” she said, grinning. “I reserve it for a pick-me-up when I’m feeling lousy.”

“Well, just don’t tell your grandmother,” he said with a conspiratorial wink. “She doesn’t like me to have too much of the sweet stuff.”

Sadie drew a cross over her heart with her index finger. “It’ll be our little secret.”

“So you want to retire your fancy dancing shoes, do ya?” He said it almost to himself. “Your grandmother and I love having you back home. And you know how much we appreciate everything you’ve done—but don’t make us the reason you give up on something you love.”

“I’m not giving up—exactly.” Sadie stared at her hands folded in her lap. “I just think it’s time to grow up and put away childish fantasies.”

Grandpa Cliff stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t call your dancing childish. My girl, I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone more beautiful, more graceful, or more talented than you up on a stage dancing under a spotlight. You can’t quit now.”

“I don’t know, Grandpa.” Her words tumbled out. “I’ve never been that embarrassed before in my entire life.”

Grandpa Cliff grabbed one of her hands, gave it a squeeze. “Nobody ever died from being embarrassed. You’re made of stronger stuff than that. And if you want New York, then keep working hard. You’ll get there.” He raised his hand to tap two fingers to his forehead. “I know these things.”

Sadie smiled, exhaling, and feeling much better than she had before he showed up. “I appreciate the vote of confidence. But what I want is to throw myself into getting ready for this opening.”

After Grandpa Cliff headed out for his morning walk around the farm, Sadie found herself in her bedroom, pulling her ballet shoes out of her dance bag. She hugged them to her chest as she settled on the fluffy, cream-colored rug at the foot of her bed.

The tears fell with abandon and before long, her shoulders started to shake as the quiet tears turned to unabashed sobs. Sadie released everything she’d been holding inside. All the frustration and disappointment poured out of her like hot lava.

She couldn’t be sure how long she sat on the floor, crying her heart out, but when the sobs finally subsided, she felt

remarkably better.

Holding up her worn slippers, Sadie examined them. They'd carried her through so much—countless auditions, two regional tours, and some local Chicago performances. The shoes felt more like an old friend than an article of clothing.

Sadie slowly stood and carried them to the antique dresser—she'd painted it a lovely shade of cream to match the rug—across from her bed. Opening the top drawer, she moved the neat stacks of wool socks to the side and lovingly placed her slippers inside. Then Sadie shut the drawer.

Staring at herself in the oval-shaped mirror above the dresser, her resolve solidified.

“Time to put away childish things,” she murmured.

Pemberley needed her. This was not the time to fall apart over a stupid dance audition.

Maybe it was a sign, she mused.

Maybe the universe was telling her it was time to move on. Not everyone got to live out their childhood dreams. And why should she believe that she would be that lucky?

No, it was better this way.

She could do what needed to be done. She owed that much to her grandparents who'd given so much of themselves to her and Elijah. Now it was her turn to give back to them. Now there was no impossible choice to make. It had all been neatly resolved.

Shouldn't she be grateful for that?

Yes, Sadie decided. She was grateful. Grateful to come to her senses before she ruined Pemberley's future because her head was stuck in the clouds. Much better to have her feet planted on the ground—firm and rock-steady. She locked eyes with her reflection. And smiled slowly.

Her course was set. Nothing left to do except put one foot in front of the other.

Sadie made a beeline for her closet and reached for the top shelf where her folded sweaters were stacked. Her fingers grazed the soft, familiar fabric of an old green cardigan.

Her mother's.

She pulled it over the worn t-shirt she wore and hugged it to her body. It had always been a source of comfort for Sadie. A reminder that her mother was always with her. She marched out of her bedroom, prepared to face the day.

Feeling stronger, more determined than ever, and wrapped in her mother's love.

# Chapter Thirteen



**A**S THE GREEN leaves of summer faded, Pemberley Farm transformed into a breathtaking blend of red, orange, and gold with the arrival of fall.

But that wasn't the only remarkable change on the horizon.

After her awful audition, Sadie poured her heart and soul into rebuilding The Barn. The contractor Jameson had secured for the job gave them a real gem of a deal. And the insurance money would more than cover the work with plenty left over to refurnish the inside.

Carlotta was tracking down pieces from local antique shops—she knew Sadie well enough to know her taste—as well as online. And Ryleigh had already restocked the damaged food items from the vendors she'd previously used.

What a relief to see it all coming together.

They'd decided to hire a part-time sales manager for Pemberley—a friend of Carlotta's who worked out of Los Angeles. He oversaw the website, online ads, and social media campaign. Sales from the online orders and the Paola Farmer's Market had been steadily increasing since the county fair.

Ryleigh ended up hiring two additional part-time workers to help meet the demand. They worked early mornings and Saturdays out of Porters kitchen until the rebuild on The Barn was finished.

Sadie and Ryleigh began the interview process to staff Pemberley's restaurant. The three of them had agreed it made the most sense to hire a part-time cook. Grandma Mae and Ryleigh would both assist with creating their own signature entrees and specialty desserts for the menu and, occasionally, help in the kitchen. While the part-time cook would supervise meal preparation and, eventually, as the business grew, kitchen staff.

After speaking at length to Ryleigh and Carlotta, Sadie decided to move Pemberley's grand opening to the end of October. That meant they only had a few weeks to get everything ready.

The countdown had begun.

But Sadie was excited, nonetheless.

The extraordinary sales from Ryleigh's baked goods had already managed to pull the farm out of the red. Words could never express how grateful Sadie was for her two best friends. They'd rallied alongside her, united in their cause, to save Pemberley.

And of course, she was thankful for Jameson. Without his help, they never would have secured the business loan in the first place. And they wouldn't have their amazing construction

crew working at a frenzied pace to meet their opening deadline.

Most of the time, she tried not to think about Jameson. It still hurt too much.

He'd stayed away from the farm. Sadie supposed it was out of respect for her feelings.

She'd heard from Ryleigh—who always seemed to know everything about everyone in Fontana—Jameson had gone out of town. Sadie assumed it was for business.

She hadn't spoken to him since the day he'd come to check on her after the fire.

But that was all in the rearview.

It was late in the afternoon on a beautiful Friday. Feeling inspired and cautiously optimistic, Sadie headed for her favorite spot on the entire property, the blue junipers by the pond. More specifically, to her tree—the one her grandfather had planted for her all those years ago when she'd first come to live at the farm.

She'd never been prouder in her ten years than she'd been in that moment. Standing in front of her own beautiful little blue juniper, in the row beside her father's and grandfather's.

Lately, she'd found herself drawn again to this place that held so much meaning.

She'd turn on a dance playlist and just—let everything go. Give herself over to the movement of the music. It was her favorite way to blow off steam at the end of a long day. She'd



lose track of time and stay at it for hours. Until the sun dipped low in the sky.

Dancing beneath the blue junipers made her feel like she was taking back her power.

And that she was finally dancing for no one but herself.

\* \* \*

Jameson sat across from his mother, Penelope McDaniels, in the upscale Kansas City restaurant she'd selected for dinner.

She reached for the cloth napkin in front of her and placed it in her lap as she gave her son a stiff smile. Warmth had never been her strong suit.

"I'm so happy you could squeeze me in this evening," Penelope said, bringing her water glass to her mouth and taking a delicate sip. She pursed her painted red lips together as she set the glass back on the elegant white tablecloth, regarding Jameson thoughtfully. "You've been quite the busy little worker bee these past few weeks."

"Business has been good," he said, reaching for his water glass and taking a long drink. The sooner he could get through this dinner, the better. He loved his mother but she was so difficult to be around he tried to avoid it as much as possible.

"Yes, it has been." Penelope's smile brightened.

Money and business were two of her favorite topics—and fairly safe game for occupying the dinner conversation.

“You know your father’s been considering stepping back where McDaniel Properties is concerned. He’s just itching to retire as soon as he’s confident the business is in competent hands.” She gave Jameson a pointed look.

Jameson suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. Instead, he picked up the menu and focused on the colorful entree selection.

Why did his mother always act like this was some big revelation?

His father had made no secret of the fact that he expected Jameson to pick up the reigns of the family business when he retired. He’d practically been groomed for it since birth. There’d been a time when he’d fervently resisted the idea—back when a professional football career had still been a realistic possibility. But in recent years he’d come around, recognizing all the good he could do when he took over McDaniel Properties.

Jameson smiled as he thought of Pemberley and Sadie.

He’d love the chance to partner with more small business opportunities that showed promise. It was good business and just plain good for the entire community to have more successful Mom and Pop ventures.

When he took over, Jameson planned to make that one of his top priorities.

“So,” Penelope continued, oblivious to her son’s lack of interest. “Your father and I have been very pleased with the

way you've conducted yourself thus far. You've brought in lots of new business for the company. Like your most recent investment in Pemberley Farm. I've always thought that place had great potential. Of course, you should have gotten more out of the deal than just a small stake in the company."

Jameson stiffened as the conversation shifted to Pemberley. "I'm very happy with the Pemberley deal. I wasn't looking to take over the business. My goal was a partnership and to help a small business with lots of potential find its sea legs. It's good PR for McDaniel Properties and good for Fontana."

He looked around for their waiter, hoping to signal him they were ready to order. The sooner he could get this dinner over with, the better.

"Oh, yes," Penelope said, scrutinizing her red nails. "I know all about your plans to partner with Pemberley Farm. And I understand why you did it. She is quite a pretty little thing. But Jameson, be serious. That girl doesn't know the first thing about running a successful business. And as the future head of this company, you can't let yourself get caught up in romantic pursuits that cloud your judgment."

Jameson felt himself boiling over as he struggled to control his anger. "You don't know the first thing about her. Sadie's ideas for Pemberley have been extraordinary. She and her partners have worked their asses off getting that farm back on its feet and I count McDaniel Properties to be extremely fortunate as their silent investor. And I didn't lose my head,"

he snapped, narrowing his eyes at her. “Give me a little credit.”

“I do give you credit,” Penelope said, opening her menu and perusing it before looking back at Jameson. “But I know you. And, more importantly, I know how manipulative women can be. I don’t doubt she has her qualities but clearly, that girl has worked her magic on you. Because you are not thinking straight. At least not where she’s concerned.”

“Stop calling her ‘that girl’. She has a name,” Jameson said tensely, balling his hands into fists in his lap.

Penelope closed her menu and laid it on the white linen tablecloth. “At least you finally ended things with her. That’s something to be thankful for.”

His mother could always find a way to get under his skin.

“I didn’t end things. Sadie did. Because she wanted to focus on Pemberley. You should at least respect the hell out of that because I do. She’s determined to make her business a success. And I’m determined to help her. And, quite frankly, I don’t care what you think. Of me or Sadie. Your opinion has been of little consequence to me for quite some time. And as for what my father thinks, I see him even less than you so I could give a rat’s ass if he thinks I’m qualified to run this company or not. I know what I’m capable of. As do our clients.” He reached for his wallet and threw some bills on the table.

“Wait, Jameson. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you,” Penelope said. “I overstepped. I—I see that now. But I’m your

mother. It's only natural I would worry about your choices." Her lips lifted at the corners into what he knew was her best attempt at a genuine smile.

"You of all people have no business giving yourself airs about motherhood," Jameson said, gritting his teeth. "The housekeeper knew more about my life growing up than you did. As I recall, you couldn't be bothered with it. There was always another charity auction or fundraiser or trip to the spa. But I still think I turned out alright in spite of it." He shook his head. "Sadie's a good person. She cares about her family and there's nothing she wouldn't do to be there for them. Pemberley deserves the chance to succeed and I plan on doing everything in my power to make that happen." He stood and looked down at his mother. "I seemed to have lost my appetite."

"Pemberley is a risky investment with Sadie Barnhart at the helm," she said sharply. "They've already had to push back their opening twice. I heard about their recent fire. It speaks well of you that, despite her shortcomings as a business owner, you still believe in her and want to help Pemberley succeed."

He waved a hand at Penelope. "I've heard enough, Mother." She just never knew when to quit. "I'm leaving now. Have a pleasant evening."

"It'll prove to be a disaster," she called after him. "Mark my words."

Nearly shaking with rage, he kept walking toward the exit.

How was it possible that his mother felt more like a stranger than the woman who supposedly raised him?

He'd meant what he'd said. Her opinion at this point in his life meant very little. Now, all he wanted to do was take over the company—when it came time—and do his part to add value to the world.

And he supposed he had Sadie to thank for inspiring that in him.

\* \* \*

On Saturday, Jameson found himself in downtown Fontana.

After handling some business at the bank, he decided to pop into Porters for some coffee. Theirs had always been a favorite and he liked the idea of supporting a local business over the bigger chains.

Pushing through the glass door, he saw Ryleigh wiping down the front counter. A smattering of customers peppered the dining area. Jameson nodded at the ones he knew as he made his way up to the counter.

“Hey, Ryleigh,” he said, with a friendly smile. “How’s everything going with the farm?”

Jameson considered Ryleigh a friend. They'd had a few classes together freshman year at KSU and, having grown up together in Fontana, they shared a kindred sort of bond. Ryleigh was also Sadie's best and oldest friend which made her extremely important to Jameson.

Ryleigh's face lit up with a huge smile when she caught sight of him which pleased Jameson immensely. Something else he liked about her was she never seemed put off by his questions about Sadie.

"Things are moving right along!" she said. "The crew you hooked us up with has been amazing."

"Always happy to help." Jameson took a seat at the counter. "Can I get a cup of coffee to go?"

"Coming right up," Ryleigh said brightly and began filling his order. "Can I interest you in a pastry to go with it?"

Jameson shrugged, grinning. "You talked me into it."

As he sat there waiting for his order, he realized the coffee wasn't what had brought him here. It was Sadie. This was one of their places. And being here would always remind him of her. He felt the familiar ache in his chest as the realization dawned on him. He missed her, that much was true. But it was more than that.

His life was just plain better when she was in it.

Ryleigh slid a white pastry bag along with a lidded paper coffee cup across the counter. "Here you go," she said, smiling.

"How much do I owe you?" He reached into his back pocket for his wallet.

Ryleigh waved a hand at him. "Oh, it's on the house. Friends and family discount," she said.

“Well, thank you.” He grabbed the coffee and lifted it in salute.

“So you’re back in town from your business trip? Your mom mentioned you were away the last time she popped in.”

Jameson stiffened at the mention of his mother but his face remained relaxed. “Yeah,” he said easily. “Just got back from a trip up north a few days ago.”

Ryleigh nodded. “Well, the farm is really coming along. We should be able to open by the end of October—at least that’s the plan.”

“That’s great.” Jameson smiled, setting the coffee beside the pastry bag, genuinely happy for Sadie. “So...how’s everybody doing?”

Ryleigh raised her eyebrows. “Everybody is...doing okay but...”

Her voice trailed off as her face fell, a very uncharacteristic Ryleigh thing to do. He couldn’t recall ever seeing her in a bad mood.

“What is it?” he asked, growing concerned. “It’s not Sadie’s grandfather again, is it? Did something happen?” All sorts of awful scenarios raced through his mind.

Ryleigh shook her head and her blond curls bounced around her face. “No, it’s nothing like that. It’s just—well, I’m worried about Sadie.”

His heart sank to his stomach. “Ryleigh, you have to tell me what happened. I’m going crazy here. What’s going on?”



“In her own words, she botched her call-back in New York. It was a few weeks ago. She refuses to talk about it. Insists she’s giving up dance. She thinks it’s a sign that she should stay in Fontana and run Pemberley.”

For a moment, Jameson was elated by Ryleigh’s news. Sadie was staying. The chance of seeing her in town would be high and maybe there was still hope they could patch things up between them. For just a moment, he let himself enjoy the possibility.

But then reality set in. And Jameson sighed. Sadie was born to dance and any other scenario was just plain wrong.

“She can’t give up dancing. It’s part of who she is,” Jameson said quietly, staring at the lid of his coffee.

“I know,” Ryleigh said. “That’s exactly what I think. She pretends everything is fine that she’s—fine. I can’t get her to talk about it. And I don’t know how to help her.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I know what you mean.”

“I know she wouldn’t want me talking to you about this but...I think that you care about her as much as I do.” She rested her elbows on the counter and her head in her hands.

“I do care about her,” Jameson said. “But she made it very clear the last time we spoke that she doesn’t want me around. I don’t know if there’s anything I can do.”

“Well, I think your knowing is enough at this point,” Ryleigh said. “Let’s think about it and see if we can come up with anything.”

“Sure,” Jameson said. “I’m happy to help if I can.”

But as much as he wanted to, Jameson wasn’t sure there was a way for him to fix things this time. And that bugged him more than he cared to admit to Ryleigh.

Sadie was in pain right now and there was nothing he could do to stop it. It felt like a sucker punch to the gut. But the more Jameson thought about it, the more he realized he had to do something. He had to find a way to help Sadie.

That’s why he ended up driving out to Pemberley on Sunday morning.

He’d been up most of the night thinking about it. Jameson knew he wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he didn’t at least try to talk to her. He couldn’t let her go on hurting while she lived a lie. There had to be something—something brilliant he could say to change her mind.

At least, that’s what he told himself when he’d hopped out of bed just before the sun came up. Now, though, as he pulled into the long driveway at Pemberley, he admitted this might not have been the best idea. But it was too late to turn back. And Jameson had never been one to back away from a challenge.

He was a McDaniels after all—tough as nails when it came to getting what he wanted. And Jameson wanted Sadie to be happy—with or without him. He’d be damned if he sat back and did nothing while she threw away her dream. He couldn’t let that happen.

It was around nine in the morning, Jameson noted, checking the clock on the dash. He knew her routine fairly well. Sadie was an early riser and, after a quick cup of coffee, she usually went for a morning walk. He could try the main house but he'd probably have better luck finding her out on the trail. He decided to just start walking and see if he could find her.

*You could just call her.*

But that would be too easy for her to ignore. He was, apparently, a glutton for punishment. And as such, he liked to make things hard on himself.

He took a deep cleansing breath as he walked. Surrounded by the sights of fall and with the faint hint of smoke lingering in the air, his spirits lifted a little. He'd probably been walking the trail that weaved around the property for about twenty minutes.

And still no sign of Sadie.

She had to be here somewhere, he mused. The truck she always drove was parked in front of the main house.

Another ten minutes of walking and he was nowhere close to finding Sadie. Just as Jameson was about to give up and do the sane thing—call—instead of practically stalking her, he heard music in the distance.

That had to be Sadie.

He couldn't imagine her grandparents would be cranking tunes out in the middle of the farm on a Sunday morning.

Besides, he knew they regularly attended the local Baptist church in town.

So it had to be her.

Walking toward the music, Jameson found himself growing nervous. What would he even say? Maybe he should've rehearsed some sort of speech instead of just winging it. Well, it was too late to come up with anything at this point.

He'd have to improvise.

Jameson came upon a beautiful expanse of lush green grass and a row of towering blue-green trees next to the pond. And underneath one of the trees stood Sadie, dressed in purple yoga pants, and a lavender knit sweater over a white tank, wearing the same baseball cap he'd seen her in the first day she'd stumbled back into town.

His breath caught in his throat.

She was so damn beautiful and it took everything in him to not run to Sadie, take her in his arms, and kiss her. He'd missed her so much that just seeing her sent his senses into a tailspin. His heart thundered in his chest but he forced himself to keep it together.

Without warning, Sadie started doing a series of fluid movements in time with the music. So graceful—he'd never seen anything so captivating in his entire life. And it hit him like a ton of bricks. Sadie hadn't given up on her dream.

Not completely.

It was woven into the fabric of her. She couldn't stop dancing. Her confidence had been shaken but not enough to keep her from doing what she loved most.

After Sadie had reminded him of his stupid senior prank that'd cost her the chance to go to her dream school, Jameson had promised himself he would find a way to make it up to her.

Sadie was so talented. It was inconceivable that all her hard work and ability wouldn't pay off eventually.

And as Jameson stood there watching her, an idea took shape.

He pulled out his phone and pressed record.

# Chapter Fourteen



**T**HE WEEKEND OF Pemberley's grand opening dawned with a cloudless blue sky and a glorious sixty degrees.

Sadie had been working so hard to arrive at this moment, she could hardly believe it was here.

The Barn was rebuilt, refurnished, restocked, and ready to serve their weekend guests. Ryleigh was so excited she was practically bursting at the seams. She'd been planning this evening's party menu for weeks. And she assured Sadie everything would go off without a hitch.

Carlotta had designed the perfect schedule of events for their opening weekend. Their sales manager had launched a killer social media campaign that had generated a lot of interest online. They were not only booked solid for this weekend but also right up until after the holidays.

Sadie had the urge to pinch herself just to make sure it was all real.

Tonight's theme was *The Great Gatsby*—a personal favorite of Carlotta's. She'd lined up a local jazz band for the event and would be taking the main stage as their lead singer. That alone had generated a lot of buzz—local girl gone off to

LA returning to make her hometown debut. People ate that stuff up.

Their weekend opener would be a lavish Twenties-inspired costume party. And as Sadie took a final tour of The Barn—decked out in 1920s decadence—she had to admit it was a fabulous idea. They'd partnered with a local costume shop to bring in a selection of appropriate attire they could offer their guests at a discounted rate.

Tomorrow, Pemberley would host a Fall Festival. Open to the public, with a maze, hay rides, food, game booths, face painting—courtesy of some local artists, pumpkin decorating, and tours of the property where guests could catch a glimpse of daily farm life.

Saturday night, they would hold hay rides with a bonfire for roasting marshmallows to make s'mores, hot dogs, and a special fall buffet prepared by Grandma Mae, Ryleigh, and their part-time chef. A local country band would also perform on the outdoor patio.

Sunday was a day of fun for the local kids. They could come—free of charge—for games with complimentary baskets of candy and take part in the first annual Pemberley Halloween Costume Contest.

But pulling all of it off seamlessly would be a huge challenge, Sadie thought.

Ryleigh came out of the swinging kitchen door, carrying a tray of tiny round cakes. "Try one of these." She lifted a cake from the tray and handed it to Sadie.

“Is this what I think it is?” Sadie asked, holding the cake up to examine it.

“I think I’ve finally tweaked my great-grandmother’s recipe to perfection. I wanted to put my own spin on it. So—I give you Pemberley’s exclusive, to-die-for, signature rum cake.”

Sadie took a big bite and the delicate flavors exploded in her mouth. Supremely-moist decadence, light and buttery but loaded with a bold rum flavor—the perfect choice for fall. “Oh my God, Ry.” She brought a hand to her mouth as she spoke, still chewing. “This is the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted.”

“Really?” Ryleigh asked, sounding hopeful. “Because I’ve tasted so many versions and they’re all starting to blur together. But you really like it?”

“Are you kidding? I love it. This will be a huge hit tonight. Mark my words.” Sadie popped the rest into her mouth. “Thank you for doing this. I love that Pemberley has a signature dessert. You are a culinary genius.” She threw her arms around Ryleigh and hugged her as a thank you.

When they pulled apart, Ryleigh set the heavy, silver tray on the counter. Placing her hands on her hips, she surveyed the space. “Do you think we’re ready for tonight?”

“I do,” Sadie said, smiling, as she glanced at the vibrant black and silver balloons hanging from the ceiling. “I think we’ve outdone ourselves. I hope you know I couldn’t have done any of this without you and Carlotta.”



“I’m incredibly grateful you included me in this project.” Her emerald eyes shining, she smiled at Sadie. “Having my own restaurant has always been my dream. I don’t know if I could have made it happen by myself.”

“No, you would have gotten there someday. Even if it was just taking over Porters when your parents retired.”

“Yes, but this is something of my own. Something I had a hand in creating. That means everything to me, Sade.”

“I know it does.” Sadie smiled back at Ryleigh. “So I guess now we can officially call you Rum-Cake Ryleigh.”

“Well, there you are,” Carlotta said, bursting through the main doors of the restaurant carrying three gift bags. “I’ve booked our hair and makeup for three o’clock this afternoon. They’ll meet us at Ryleigh’s. That way we can focus on getting ready away from all the hustle and bustle. I just finished my run-thru with the band. They’ll be here at six for final sound check before our guests arrive.” She gestured to the bags. “And I got us all a little something to celebrate the opening.” Carlotta handed a bag to each of them.

“You bought yourself a gift as well?” Sadie asked, suppressing a smile.

“Of course I did.” Carlotta tossed her glossy black hair over one shoulder. “I love buying myself gifts.”

“Can we open them now?” Ryleigh asked, grinning.

“For God’s sake, yes! Open them.” Carlotta said, looking exasperated but happy.

Sadie reached into the layers of tissue paper and pulled out a small box of dark red velvet. “Oh, Car,” she breathed. Popping the lid open, she saw a rose gold, heart-shaped, pendant necklace inside. She looked over at Ryleigh and saw she’d also opened the jewelry box and her green eyes shone with tears.

“It’s a locket,” Carlotta called out merrily. “Open it.”

When Sadie popped open the locket, she saw a picture of the three of them, freshman year of high school.

“This was the first picture we ever took together. Grandma Mae found it for me. I thought it was important to mark this big step we’re taking today by remembering when it all began.”

“It’s perfect, Car,” Ryleigh said, reaching out to grab her hand.

Sadie reached for Carlotta’s other hand and the three of them stood there, staring down at their lockets.

She knew for the rest of her life she would always remember this moment, taking this huge, great step with her two best friends.

“And now, we head to the costume racks at the main house. I’ve already asked the owner, Mrs. Wilder, to pull a few things that I think will suit us perfectly.” Carlotta clapped her hands together. “Ladies, this night belongs to us and I, for one, am going to enjoy every minute of it.”

\* \* \*

Carlotta had been right about the dresses she'd found for each of them, Sadie thought, staring at her reflection in Ryleigh's full-length bedroom mirror. She'd chosen a tea-length, ice-blue dress with lots of fringe and lace for Sadie. It complemented her red hair and blue eyes. The stylist had fixed her hair into a twenties style with curls pinned low around her face and a sparkly silver headband with a feather attached. Painted red lips and smoky eyes completed the look. Sadie was very pleased with the overall effect.

Ryleigh walked into her bedroom, having just finished her hair and make-up. "What do you think?" she asked, doing a full turn for Sadie as she beamed with excitement. Her dress was jade green and matched her eyes. Blond curls bobbed around her face and she wore a beaded headband across her forehead, looking exactly like Sadie had always pictured Daisy Buchanan when she'd first read *The Great Gatsby* in high school.

"You look amazing," Sadie said as Ryleigh came to stand beside her in the mirror. "Correction, we look amazing. Is Carlotta almost ready? We should get back to the farm so we can make sure everything's in place for tonight."

"Relax," Carlotta said, from the doorway. "We still have plenty of time."

Sadie turned to her friend and a low gasp escaped from her lips as she took in Carlotta's black velvet dress with a swinging skirt and silver accents that suited her curvy body to perfection. Gone was her long dark hair, and in its place was a

wig in her exact hair color. It was coiled around her face in a chin-length bob with a fringe of bangs. A black feather headband with silver accents and a long string of pearls knotted at her chest completed the look. She could have stepped off the pages of a glamour magazine from the Twenties.

“You look amazing, Car,” Sadie said.

“Why thank you, darling.” Carlotta did a little curtsy. “I just throw this ol’ thing on when I don’t care what I look like,” she said in a singsong voice.

A half-hour later, they piled into Sadie’s truck and drove to Pemberley. She parked near the entrance to The Barn. They’d hired parking attendants and a full wait staff for tonight’s event.

In addition to the guests that had booked weekend stays, they were expecting most of Fontana to show along with a handful of area reporters and prominent businesses from neighboring towns. Good word of mouth was critical to Pemberley’s success. There was a reporter from the *Kansas City Star* in particular that she wanted—no, absolutely needed—to impress.

Ryleigh threw an apron over her dress and dashed off to the kitchen to check on their progress with tonight’s menu. The cook they’d hired a few weeks ago would be overseeing the kitchen while the waiters—local temps they’d brought in for the opening—circulated throughout the patio and indoor dining area.

Carlotta scurried away to meet up with the jazz band setting up on stage to do their final soundcheck. And Sadie was left to check on their weekend arrivals at the main house. Grandma Mae had volunteered to step in and oversee so Sadie could be free to peruse the grounds and deal with any last-minute problems.

“Well, look at you!” Grandma Mae exclaimed when Sadie walked into the main house. She stood behind the huge mahogany desk they’d selected as a receptionist station for the front parlor. Eventually, when business proved steady, they’d hire some part-time workers to help cover weekend check-ins and other business. For now, Sadie and her grandmother would split the job of meeting the needs of their Pemberley bed-and-breakfast patrons.

Sadie did a little runway turn for her grandmother. “You like it?”

“I really do,” Grandma Mae said. “It suits you.”

“And what about your costume?” Sadie demanded with a smile. “Did you find something on the racks in the living room?”

“Oh, no,” her grandmother scoffed. “I’m too old for such things.”

“You most certainly are not old,” Sadie said, fisting her hands on her hips. “And if I have to dress up then so do you.”

Grandma Mae shook her head, opening her mouth to protest.

Sadie wagged her index finger at her grandmother. “Don’t make me sic Carlotta on you.”

Grandma Mae laughed. “Okay, if it means that much to you. I’ll stop by the costume racks and pick out something for me...and Grandpa,” she added with a wink. “You know it might be fun at that.”

“Yes,” Sadie said, nodding. “And I think this family could use some fun for a change. How are the check-ins going so far?”

“Things are clicking right along. We have six out of seven rooms occupied. Complementary tea service and Ryleigh’s welcome baskets of goodies have all been delivered. I checked all the rooms this afternoon to make sure they were clean and dressed with a vase of fresh flowers. We’ll serve high tea in the parlor in about a half-hour. A few of the temps will bring that over and serve our guests. I think we’re off to a great start.” She smiled brightly at Sadie. “Relax. Everyone’s going to have a marvelous time this weekend. You have nothing to worry about.”

“I know you’re right,” said Sadie. “But I just can’t help it. I feel like I’m just waiting for the other shoe to drop and the anticipation is tying me into knots.”

“Well, don’t give in to that kind of thinking, my girl. You’ve done a fabulous job getting this business off the ground and tonight I want you to enjoy watching all of your hard work pay off. No more of this gloom and doom talk,” Grandma Mae said, wagging a finger at Sadie. “The only thing

you have control over is your attitude. Rest of it's up to the good Lord."

"Okay," Sadie said, taking a calming breath. "I promise to try and stop worrying. Now, I have to dash off and check in with Mr. Sloane about tomorrow's festivities."

"He and your grandfather were out at the auxiliary barn last time I saw them. You might head out that way."

"Thanks for the heads up...and the pep talk." Sadie walked behind the check-in desk and reached underneath for her work boots. She slipped out of her patent-leather Mary Jane-style heels and into the boots. "I'll be back soon and I can't wait to see you turn yourself into an authentic-looking flapper." Sadie grinned at her grandmother as she headed toward the exit.

At that same moment, the front door opened.

"Sadie, um—wow."

"Jameson," she said, blinking in disbelief as if her brain couldn't accept that he was standing right in front of her. "What—what are you doing here?" Her heart jack rabbit in her chest.

"I'm staying for the weekend." Jameson smiled briefly. "Trying out the bed-and-breakfast. I—I thought your grandmother would have told you since she booked the reservation."

No, she didn't," Sadie said, gritting her teeth as she turned to give Grandma Mae a pointed look. "It was booked as a friend of the family under my grandmother's name."

Her grandmother pretended to look innocent, ignoring the face Sadie made. “Welcome to Pemberley.” She fixed a radiant smile on her face as she held up a room key. “Your room is all ready. Please let me know if there’s anything you need and we hope you enjoy your stay with us.”

It was just like her grandmother to keep it a secret that Jameson was staying for the weekend. She knew he’d sent in his RSVP for tonight’s party but it had completely blindsided her, running into him like this.

She’d thought she had more time to prepare—to compose herself for when their paths inevitably crossed at the party. But him staying at Pemberley just felt way too...intimate. And completely distracting, which filled her with anger. Because the last thing she needed right now was to be distracted.

“You look...” Jameson’s voice faded as his eyes trailed down her body and back up to her eyes, causing her face to flame—the redheaded curse. “Incredibly beautiful.” He eyed her feet with a smile. “The boots are a nice touch.”

Oh.” Sadie laughed, feeling self-conscious. “I—uh—I have to go check on a few things before the party.”

“Do you want some company?” he asked in a friendly tone.

“No,” she said quickly. “That’s okay. You should get settled in.” Her throat went dry as she stared at him, trying to think of something to say. “We’re serving high tea soon if you’re interested.”



Jameson nodded as if he understood how she was feeling. “Of course. I’m very interested...in tea,” he said, winking. “I’ll see you at the party tonight, Sadie.”

And all she could do was nod, like a toy bobblehead on humiliating display, before fleeing out the door.

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Ryleigh carefully arranged Pemberley’s signature rum cakes on a silver tray, determined to make them look perfect for the party guests.

The waiters would be serving them at the close of the buffet-style meal. And she wanted her creations to be the evening’s showstopper.

The jazz band filling The Barn with its sultry melodies, Ryleigh found herself lost in her task, oblivious to the night’s enchanting atmosphere. It all fell away as she focused, with laser-like precision, on the task at hand.

“I had a hunch I might find you in here.”

Ryleigh froze at the sound of the familiar voice while her stomach did somersaults. She whirled around, doing an internal happy dance.

“Elijah! Don’t you look handsome! I didn’t know you were coming tonight. Oh my goodness! Sadie’s going to be thrilled.” She gave him her brightest smile.

He looked scrumdiddlyumptious in his red velvet suit, matching hat, and gleaming black and white shoes.

The heat from the oven—at least she told herself that was the culprit—had Ryleigh feeling flushed and she resisted the urge to fan herself, for obvious reasons.

“Thanks, Ry!” Elijah returned her smile before enveloping her in one of his signature bear hugs. She breathed in the unmistakably male scent of his aftershave, an enticing combo of earthy and citrus tones. “You look gorgeous tonight, by the way.” He pulled away, holding her at arms-length with a boyish grin. “And this party is sensational. You three should be really proud of everything you’ve accomplished.”

“Thanks.” Ryleigh could feel herself blushing as she stared up at him. “That means a lot coming from you.”

And it really did.

His opinion was one of the few she held in the highest regard.

“Well, I better get back out there. I need to find Sadie and my grandparents. But I just wanted to say ‘hello’—oh, and wish you good luck, of course.”

He gave her a little wave before heading back to the dining room.

After Elijah left, Ryleigh closed her eyes, stealing a few moments to compose herself before returning to her rum cakes.

\* \* \*

Sadie surveyed the crowded room, her heart swelling with pride as she took in the happy faces of their guests.

The night was in full swing, and the party seemed to be a huge hit so far. Guests chattered over plates of decadent food and sipped champagne as they laughed merrily. Dazzling couples filled the dance floor as they enjoyed the jazz band, halfway through its second set.

Carlotta's angelic voice floated over the buzz of the room as she sang a sultry rendition of *At Last*.

Sadie caught sight of Ryleigh bustling around, darting between the kitchen and the dining area, as she checked to make sure the waiters carried full trays of hors d'oeuvres and champagne.

In a half-hour, there would be a full-service dinner, presented buffet-style. Long tables occupied one wall of the restaurant, covered with elegant black tablecloths, floating gold and silver balloons, and black feather-filled golden vases. Warming burners for the metal containers of food the kitchen would be serving this evening were already placed.

A champagne-filled glass tower encompassed the far corner of the buffet and a decorated dessert table was positioned next to the glass patio doors. A five-tiered, raspberry-and-creme-filled cake sat in the center surrounded by a selection of decadent desserts and pastries. The waiters would deliver Ryleigh's miniature rum cakes to their guests as they finished their meal.

She let out a contented sigh as she headed toward the dance floor. They'd been planning this night for so long, watching it come to fruition felt a little surreal.

A waiter dressed in a crisp white shirt, black bow tie, black pants with suspenders, and a sharp, Twenties gangster-style hat offered Sadie a glass of champagne which she happily accepted.

Taking a sip of the bubbly goodness, Sadie caught sight of her grandparents, decked out in their Roaring Twenties finery, walking toward her wearing huge smiles.

"You throw quite the shindig, Sadie girl," Grandpa Cliff said with Grandma Mae on his arm. He wore a dapper, black suit with a white tie and a black hat with a matching white stripe of fabric around the brim. His shoes were a patent leather black with a matching swatch of white across the tops.

He looked sensational.

"Thank you, Grandpa," Sadie said, grinning. "Look at you two! You both look fantastic!"

"I told you I'd get Grandpa to dress up," Grandma Mae said. She wore a silver tea-length, Twenties-style dress with a beaded fringe that swished when she moved. A matching silver headband with a white feather adorned her short, white hair and elegant white evening gloves completed the look.

"How did she wrangle you into it?" Sadie asked her grandfather.

“She promised me my favorite chocolate crème pie for dessert tomorrow night.” He patted his stomach. “The woman knows the way to my heart.”

Sadie laughed. “Whatever works.” She scanned the crowd for a sign of her brother. “I thought I saw Eli around here somewhere but I haven’t had a chance to say hello. Did you know he was coming?”

“He wanted it to be a surprise,” Grandma said. “My boy looks so handsome in his red velvet suit coat. Looks just like Sky Masterson right out of *Guys and Dolls*.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Sadie said. “I’m so glad he could come. I think Mom and Dad would be proud of what we’ve accomplished tonight.”

“You’ve created something very special,” Grandma Mae said, taking her hand. “And I know people won’t forget it. I predict this business of yours is going to take off.”

Sadie nodded. “I hope you’re right. As long as everything goes according to plan tonight and the rest of the weekend, I think we’ll do just fine.”

Grandpa Cliff reached out and patted her cheek. “There’s nothing to worry about, Sadie girl. Folks can see for themselves how hard you’ve worked. And I suspect most of ‘em will be itching to come back and recapture a little bit of the magic you’ve created here tonight.”

“Thank you,” Sadie said, her eyes brimming. “Now I insist that you go enjoy the party. Maybe take a spin around the

dance floor before dinner starts.”

“We might just do that,” Grandpa Cliff said, taking her grandmother by the hand.

As she watched them walk off, amidst the evening’s glitz and glamour, her heart swelled with pride.

How lucky was she to be raised by two of the most extraordinary people she’d ever known?

Grandpa Cliff had recovered from his heart attack and they were going to save the farm. Her family would hopefully be able to hold onto it for many generations to come.

And if she had even a small part to play in making it happen, Sadie would be forever grateful and humbled by that.

“Hi.”

She whirled around to see Jameson McDaniels standing there.

A lump formed in her throat as she stared up at him. He looked so handsome in his black suit with a pinstriped vest and a white bow tie that matched the handkerchief peeking out of his breast pocket. His gleaming blond hair was slicked back from his face, the lights catching his pretty green eyes.

“Jameson,” she said, clearing her throat. “You look great.”

“Thank you,” he said with sincerity. “I just wanted to tell you this is amazing. You really pulled it off. I’m so proud of you.”

Hearing his praise filled Sadie's heart. She couldn't deny that his opinion mattered to her.

"That means a lot. Thank you." As the heat rushed to her face, Sadie wished for the millionth time he didn't have such a dazzling effect on her. But with him standing there, looking so handsome while the stirring sounds of the jazz band wafted through the room, it was hard not to be mesmerized.

"I—uh—was hoping, if you had the time, maybe I could persuade you to take a spin on the dance floor," Jameson said, a hopeful expression on his face.

"Oh—um...well..." Caught off-guard, she struggled to find the right words. Dancing probably wouldn't help her much in the getting-over-him department.

"Jameson, there you are!" Penelope McDaniels' merry voice rang out as she sauntered toward them, a smile fixed on her face.

She wore a golden flapper-style sheath complete with black evening gloves and a beaded, crystal headpiece over her golden curls, pinned close to her face. The effect was understated and expensive elegance. She looked stunning, Sadie begrudgingly admitted.

"Hello, Penelope." Sadie forced a smile on her face. "That dress looks amazing on you."

"Oh, what a sweet thing to say, Sadie." Penelope slipped her arm through Jameson's as she looked Sadie up and down

like a predator sizing up its prey before the kill. “And don’t you look absolutely precious?”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Sadie said, still smiling. She searched her surroundings for a reason to make her escape. Being around Penelope always left her feeling uneasy and she wasn’t in the mood for it tonight.

“Jameson, I’m just dying to take a turn on the dance floor but you know how much your father hates it. Sadie, I hope you don’t mind if I steal him away for a quick spin.” Her smile was triumphant as she looked at Sadie.

“Not at all,” Sadie said, trying to keep her tone light. “I need to check on a few things anyway. Thank you both for coming tonight and supporting Pemberley’s opening.”

“Of course,” Penelope said with feigned enthusiasm. “We wouldn’t have missed it for the world. I’m impressed that you were able to get things up and running so quickly after that unfortunate fire.”

“Guess I have your son to thank for that,” Sadie said stiffly, feeling the sting of Penelope’s words.

“He’s one of the good ones, isn’t he?” Penelope said.

“He really is,” Sadie said, her eyes locking on Jameson’s.

They stared at each other. And for a moment the rest of the party fell away. It was just her and Jameson and all she wanted to do was pull him close and tell him how much she missed him, how much she wished they could just go back in time and pick up where they’d left off.



But that was nothing but wishful thinking.

No point in torturing herself by believing there was hope for a future with Jameson. Not when her family was counting on her to get their business up and thriving. She couldn't afford to lose her balance again.

No matter how much she wanted to be with him, she wanted to help her family more.

“Which reminds me, Jameson. There's a beautiful young lady here tonight I want to introduce you to,” Penelope said, pulling Sadie out of her thoughts. “Her mother's an old friend. Sadie, would you excuse us?”

Sadie nodded bleakly, her face burning as she watched Penelope steer Jameson away. Her words cut through Sadie like a knife. No doubt, she was loving the fact that things between Sadie and her son had ended.

With a shake of her head, Sadie headed toward the kitchen to check with Ryleigh about the status of the buffet dinner.

An hour and a half later, while party guests lingered over their after-dinner drinks and desserts, Carlotta returned to the raised platform they'd erected for the band.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Carlotta spoke crisply into the mic. She waited a few beats for the din of the crowd to settle before continuing. “We are so pleased to welcome you to Pemberley Farm this evening.” Her sentiment was met with thunderous applause and cheers from the audience. “And now,

I'd like to bring up the person responsible for tonight's festivities. Please join me in welcoming Sadie Barnhart to the stage!"

Sadie could barely hear the applause over the drum of her heart. She was certain her face must be on fire as she rose from her seat at the table nearest the stage. Even though they'd planned this, it still didn't make it any easier.

Dancing in front of a crowd was one thing. But delivering a short speech in front of everybody was an entirely different matter.

It set her teeth on edge, her jaw rigid with anticipation.

Nevertheless, she balled her hands at her sides and stepped onto the raised platform, standing behind the mic.

She cleared her throat and it echoed loudly throughout the room.

"Thank you so much for supporting Pemberley tonight. I speak for my family and my partners when I say it means the world to us. Pemberley has been a staple in Fontana since its conception and, with the support of this tremendous community, we believe it will stay that way for many generations to come." Sadie paused as the crowd broke into enthusiastic applause. "We have a fun-filled opening weekend planned and we're so excited to show all of our fantastic guests a truly special Pemberley Farm experience."

Her eyes found Jameson seated at a table with his parents. A gorgeous brunette sat beside him. She leaned in, smiling,

and whispered something into his ear.

Sadie's stomach reeled. She felt like she was going to be sick.

“So, without further adieu, I'd like to invite you back onto the dance floor as our lovely Carlotta Everclear, accompanied by the Fontana Jazz Band, retakes the stage. Have a wonderful night, everyone.”

The applause echoed in her ears as she hurried off-stage and made a beeline for the ladies' room.

\* \* \*

Jameson watched Sadie leave the stage in what appeared to be a mad dash.

He was up on his feet before he could even think about it, walking toward the same bathroom Sadie had entered.

He waited for her to come out of the swinging door, the jazzy sounds from the band filling his ears. Honestly, it was a nice break from his mother and the surprise blind date she'd saddled him with for the evening.

Not officially of course, but it was clear from his mother's behavior and how the girl—Katherine or something like that—was acting that this was a setup. Katherine was a pretty girl and she seemed decent enough. But the real problem was she wasn't Sadie.

And the damned truth was no one else would ever be good enough in his eyes.

So even if Sadie just wanted to be friends, he would do whatever it took to stay in her life.

He stood, leaning with his back against the wall, his long legs crossed at the ankle, waiting for Sadie to come out of the bathroom. He needed to know she was alright.

Then he could find the strength to head back to his table and endure his overbearing mother.

\* \* \*

After composing herself inside the bathroom stall, Sadie checked her reflection in the mirror one last time before heading back out to face the crowd.

Some deep breathing, eyes closed against the cold metal door, had finally soothed her stomach. She'd never been a fan of public speaking but that wasn't the reason she'd ended up hiding out in the ladies' room.

Seeing Jameson with that girl—the one Penelope had mentioned—sent her into a tailspin.

It shouldn't bother her this much.

It was something Sadie was just going to have to get used to.

After all, she'd been the one to break things off.

But did he have to be so unbothered by it?

It appeared she was the only one holding on to the past while he sauntered off into the future. Completely over her.

Taking a final deep breath, she pushed through the swinging door.

“Sadie.”

As if she’d dreamed him into existence, Sadie turned to see Jameson lounging against the wall.

She pressed a hand to her chest, “Jameson, I—I didn’t see you there.”

“I got worried when I saw you run off-stage.” He walked toward her, eyebrows furrowed. “Is everything okay? Are you sick?”

Sadie shook her head, trying to smile. “No, I’m fine. I promise. I just—needed a break. Tonight has been a lot.”

Jameson nodded but he didn’t seem convinced. “Big night,” he said. “I get it. Are you sure you feel up to staying? I could walk you back to the main house.”

She shook her head again. “No, no. I’m fine.”

“You don’t seem fine,” he said, locking eyes with Sadie. “Talk to me. What’s going on?”

“Jameson, just leave me alone. Please,” she said pressing her fingers into her eyelids. “I don’t want to talk about it. I have to go.”

She moved to walk away from him but Jameson reached for her arm. “Please tell me what’s wrong.”

Sadie sighed, turning to face him. “It shouldn’t matter that you’re here with someone else. You’re free to be with whoever

you want.”

A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “I’m not here with anyone, Sadie. I don’t even know that girl. My mother just sprung her on me as she often does without even checking to see how I feel about it.”

“Oh,” Sadie said simply. “I’m sorry. That isn’t fair—me getting upset when I see some girl whispering in your ear. It’s completely selfish. I don’t mean to be this way. Not after everything you’ve done for me and my family. Just do me a favor and forget we ever had this conversation.” She tried to smile.

“I don’t want to forget,” Jameson said, staring at Sadie with an intense look in his eyes. “Tell me what you want.”

She shook her head. “You make it sound simple. But it’s not. I have people counting on me. I can’t let them down again. I—I can’t afford to lose my balance. And that’s what it feels like when I’m around you—like I can’t keep from falling.”

“I feel the same way. But maybe that’s how it’s supposed to be.” Jameson moved in closer to Sadie, causing her breath to hitch in her throat. “But if you let me, I’ll be there to catch you when you fall.”

“I—I don’t know, Jameson. It just felt like we were moving so fast and all I wanted to do was be with you and... I’m scared to lose control—scared that I’ll screw up again where the farm is concerned.”

“Well, I think the point of a relationship is that you wouldn’t have to face any of that alone. We could figure it out together.”

Sadie took a step back, clearing her throat. “I should go. I need to check in with Ryleigh. I just...can’t do this right now. I’m sorry.”

She turned and walked away—as fast as her legs could carry her.

# Chapter Fifteen



**S**ADIE RETREATED INTO the kitchen, relieved to be far away from Jameson.

She almost wished he hadn't come tonight.

Being around him was much harder than she'd anticipated.

Sadie sighed, leaning her back against the enormous steel refrigerator, the coolness soothing her fraying nerves.

"Tough night?"

Sadie looked up to see her brother, Elijah, staring down at her with concerned eyes.

"It's been a lot to take on but I think our guests are satisfied with the results."

"Sade, you've done an amazing job tonight. Mom and Dad would be so proud of you." He smiled at her.

And it was like a floodgate releasing.

Her eyes pooled as she stared up at him. He looked so much like their father. So handsome and distinguished—and a doctor, no less.

Their parents would've been so proud of him, she thought wistfully.

"I don't know if that's true, Eli. But I hope so. To tell you the truth, lately, I've been feeling like I can't do anything



right.”

His brows knitted together. “You’ve always been too hard on yourself. As long as I can remember, you always thought you needed to be the strong one. Even right after Mom and Dad died and we moved here. You were so concerned with being perfect, making sure you did everything right, checking to make sure I was okay. But you never let anyone take care of you. It’s okay to fall apart sometimes. It’s okay to ask for help. You don’t have to do everything by yourself. We’re a family and we’ll always be here for each other.”

“You’re right,” Sadie said quietly, his words ringing true. They struck a chord and resonated somewhere deep within her. “I don’t have to do this all by myself. Mom and Dad wouldn’t want that.”

“No, they wouldn’t.” He cleared his throat as he stared down at her, frowning. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with Jameson McDaniels, would it? I saw the two of you talking and followed you in here to make sure you were okay.”

She pursed her lips together. “It has everything to do with Jameson. I—I think I’m in love with him.”

“Good,” Elijah said. “Ryleigh told me as much. We’ve just been waiting for you to admit it to yourself.”

Sadie shook her head. “Wait. You knew?”

“Please, anyone with eyes can see you two are mad for each other. So what are you waiting for, Sadie?”

She stared up at him, blinking. “I don’t know. All the excuses I’ve made...they just feel hollow now. I love him and that scares me to death.”

“Don’t let the fear of striking out keep you from playing the game,” Elijah said.

Sadie smiled at her brother reciting one of Grandpa Cliff’s favorite quotes. “You’re hitting me with Babe Ruth right now?” She laughed. “When did you get to be so smart?”

“I’m a doctor. We’re supposed to be smart, remember?” He grinned and pulled Sadie in for a hug.

“I need to tell Jameson how I feel,” she said, once they broke apart.

“I think that’s a great idea.”

Ryleigh burst into the kitchen, her eyes wild, blond curls flying. “Sadie, come quick! You too, Elijah! I can’t get them to stop!”

“What?” she cried, sprinting out of the kitchen, Elijah and Ryleigh at her heels.

When she reached the dining area, Sadie saw two of their waiters engaged in an all-out brawl, hurling punches and throwing random items at each other. The party-goers had stopped their merriment to watch the spectacle.

Carlotta rushed offstage to assist them as the jazz band played an upbeat tune. The dancing on the main floor had ceased as everyone watched the waiters fight, a mix of horror and fascination on their faces.

Sadie's heart pounded, thundering in her ears, as she tried to make sense of what was happening.

One thing was clear, they had to stop the fight before someone got hurt and they had a potential lawsuit on their hands.

She sprinted toward the waiters who'd moved their brawl to the buffet table.

One of them grabbed a silver platter filled with bread, dumped the contents on the floor, and smashed it into the other waiter's face.

Hands balled into fists, white-hot fury surged through her as she lumbered toward the men, intent on using whatever means necessary to end this.

Suddenly, Jameson appeared. He grabbed one of the waiters by the collar and roughly threw him out of the way so he could step between them, ducking the silver platter that hurled through the air.

"Cut it out!" Jameson growled, his face stony as he looked from one to the other.

Elijah reached the waiters a few seconds before Sadie and he assisted Jameson with separating the two brawlers. Mr. Sloane, Grandpa Cliff, and Mr. Porter were also headed over to help.

The waiters snarled and yelled at each other but were unable to escape Jameson and Elijah, who held the men—hands pinned behind their backs—apart from each other.

Horried, Sadie demanded, “What in the world is going on?”

Guests were making their way over to the buffet table to get a better look at her humiliation. Her eyes found the *Kansas City Star* reporter, scribbling furiously into a small notebook.

Next to him stood Penelope McDaniels. She caught Sadie’s eye and gave her a small, triumphant smile.

Sadie turned to Carlotta who’d come to stand beside her and said quietly, “We need to draw the crowd back toward the stage. Can you do that?”

“On it,” she said, sauntering away from the chaos.

“We’ll help direct folks back toward the dance floor.” Grandpa Cliff nodded at Mr. Sloane and Mr. Porter.

Sadie stepped closer to the disgruntled waiters. “Shall we take this outside?” Her eyes swept over Jameson and Elijah.

Now, now, everybody,” Grandpa Cliff called out, addressing the crowd. “Show’s over. What do you say we all head back to the dance floor and enjoy some more of those jazzy tunes?”

Mr. Porter and Mr. Sloane started herding the party guests away from the enormous mess in front of the buffet table.

In hushed tones, Ryleigh spoke to a cluster of waiters standing off to the side who’d come out to observe the commotion. They began cleaning up the mess the brawlers had left in their wake.

Once they were outside and both waiters had calmed down some, Sadie asked, “What in the hell was that about?”

Neither said anything so Sadie continued. “Fine. Either you tell me what happened in there or I will hold you both personally liable for the damages you’ve caused tonight. You scared those people in there half to death! You ruined our opening!” she said, her voice rising. “And you have nothing to say for yourselves?”

She felt the desperation building inside her as the men sat in patio chairs, refusing to talk. It just about sent her over the edge.

Elijah laid a hand on her shoulder and she knew he meant it to be a comforting gesture but it felt patronizing.

How could this be happening?

All of their hard work ruined in a single moment.

And what about the reporter from Kansas City?

She could just see the disastrous headline splashed across the front page of *The Kansas City Star*.

One of the waiters pulled a phone from his pants pocket and stared at the screen. Then he patted the other waiter on the shoulder. “Show’s over, buddy,” he said. “I just got the text.”

“What do you mean show’s over?” Jameson asked, his eyes narrowing as he folded his arms.

The other waiter shrugged, glancing at Sadie before turning to Jameson. “We’re actors, man. We were hired for the

evening to pose as waiters and then act out an elaborate fight.”

“We were supposed to keep the act going until someone sent a text telling us to end the performance.” The other waiter waved his phone in the air. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I just assumed you knew.”

“No,” Sadie said softly, her throat feeling like sandpaper. “I certainly did not know.”

“Where did you get the waiter costumes?” Elijah asked.

“They were waiting in the kitchen with our names pinned to them,” said the waiter who’d received the text. “We work for a regional acting company. I promise it’s all above board.” He fiddled with his phone before handing it to Sadie. The phone displayed a website advertising stunt work and party entertainers for hire. It appeared to be legitimate.

“Let me see it.” Elijah came over and she handed him the phone.

“I’m afraid this was a setup, Sadie,” Jameson said, frowning. “Someone wanted to ruin your opening.”

“Yeah, that’s not hard to work out,” she muttered.

And it wasn’t too difficult to imagine who was responsible for tonight’s showstopper. When Sadie thought of who could want Pemberley to fail, only one person came to mind.

Penelope McDaniels.

But how could she tell Jameson that his mother was behind such a heinous attack?

The waiters apologized again to Sadie for ruining the party, insisting they had no idea she'd been clueless about the entire thing. She waved them off, telling them she would just like them to return their outfits and leave the premises immediately.

When they'd gone, Sadie sank into a patio chair, feeling a little bewildered. She knew she should probably go check in with her friends, make sure everything had settled down inside, but she couldn't seem to get her feet moving.

She just needed a moment to clear her head.

Then she could face it.

"Why don't I go check on Ryleigh and see if she needs any help?" Elijah gave his sister a pointed look.

Sadie nodded, understanding. "Thanks, Eli."

After Elijah left, Jameson sank into the chair beside hers. They sat in silence, staring at the patio lights, dancing on the surface of the oval-shaped pool.

"I'm sorry," Jameson said quietly. "You don't deserve this."

"Penelope set this up," Sadie blurted out before she could change her mind. He had a right to know. "I'm certain of it."

He gave an exasperated sigh, dragging a hand through his dark blonde hair. "She can be ruthless when she wants something."

“She wants Pemberley,” Sadie said. “She tried to get my grandparents to sell when they fell on hard times. She’s hinted on more than one occasion the offer still stands—when I finally realize I’m a failure as a business owner, that is.”

“You’re not a failure.” Jameson reached for her hand. It was so automatic that it took a moment for her to register it.

“Maybe she’s right. Maybe I can’t do this.” Sadie pulled her hand away and stood, staring at the water.

Jameson came to stand beside her, gently placing his hands on her shoulders and turning her to face him. “Now, you listen to me, Sadie Barnhart. You’ve poured your heart and soul into this place and it shows. You pulled off a fantastic opening tonight. Not even my mother can spoil that. She tried but she failed. Don’t you dare let her get inside your head. She’s not worth it.”

As Sadie stared up at him, she realized he deserved to know the truth.

The whole truth.

“I need to tell you something.”

“Okay,” Jameson said. The warmth from his hands on her shoulders spread through Sadie like wildfire.

She took a deep breath, letting it slowly seep out.

There came a time when you had to find the courage to face the hard truths.

The truths that scared you the most.



“I’m in love with you, Jameson. And—God—I know I’ve made a mess of things. I’ve been unfair to you—selfish, even—and I don’t expect you to forgive me for the way I behaved but...I thought you deserved to know the truth. So...I guess that’s it.” She rubbed her lips together as she gazed at the pool, her stomach in knots, waiting for him to say something.

“If you can forgive me for being such an ass in high school don’t you think I can forgive you for putting me off while you figured out how you felt about me?” he asked. “And for the record, Sadie, I’m in love with you, too.” He tipped her chin up toward him.

“Really?” she asked softly, as what she could only describe as sheer elation coursed through her.

“I think I fell for you the moment you drove back into my life in that beat-up, old car.”

Sadie smiled, remembering how much she’d despised him that first day. How much she’d wished it had been anyone but Jameson McDaniels who’d stopped to lend a hand.

Life certainly had a sense of humor.

She hooked her arms around his neck and, as he leaned down and kissed her, Sadie decided life didn’t get any more perfect than this moment. With this completely unexpected person who’d somehow managed to turn her world upside down. And suddenly, Sadie knew everything would be alright.

Because no matter what happened, they’d be facing it together.

And she imagined her parents, wherever they may be, were smiling down on her and sharing in her unbridled joy.

\* \* \*

Hand in hand, Sadie and Jameson headed back inside to join in the merriment.

She couldn't remember a time when she'd been this happy. Walking beside Jameson, knowing he felt for her everything she was feeling for him, she knew there was no place she'd rather be than at his side.

Carlotta and the jazz band were going strong and the dance floor was packed, Sadie noted with satisfaction. Others mingled over coffee and drinks, as they laughed and talked, finishing up their desserts.

Sadie scanned the room for the reporter from Kansas City, wanting to explain what had happened with the waiters. She hoped maybe she could persuade him to omit the staged brawl from his review.

When she finally spotted the reporter, he was sandwiched between her grandparents, smiling and laughing, and, by all appearances, enjoying himself. Grandpa Cliff winked as he caught Sadie's eye.

Maybe she wasn't the only Barnhart who'd had the idea to schmooze a good review out of him, she thought, smiling to herself.

As they made their way to her grandparents' table, Penelope McDaniels, on the arm of Jameson's father walked

toward them, a smile plastered on her face.

“Jameson, Sadie, there you two are,” Penelope’s voice sang out, her gaze lingering on their joined hands though her smile never faltered. “What a nightmare that fight was!” Penelope clucked her tongue. “Sadie, my dear, you really must do a better job of vetting your staff before you hire them. I’m afraid it’s a rookie mistake. I do hope it doesn’t give people misgivings about staying at Pemberley. How disastrous that would be for you and your grandparents.”

“That’s enough, Mother,” Jameson said evenly.

The senior Mr. McDaniels chuckled. “Penelope, this is a party. No need to bring everyone down with talk of gloom and doom.” He smiled at Sadie, having the decency to look slightly embarrassed. “Sadie, this has been a wonderful evening. You and your partners should be very proud.” He looked at Jameson. “My son has a keen eye for business. I have a feeling his investment in Pemberley will turn out to be very profitable.”

“Thank you, sir,” Sadie said, feeling a bit stunned. She hadn’t expected him to be so warm and appraising.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must say goodnight to the mayor before he leaves or he’ll never forgive me.” Mr. McDaniels smiled and nodded at Jameson before walking away.

“You may have my husband and son fooled. But I’m not so easily deceived.” Penelope’s smile turned menacing. “I have no doubt they’ll see the error in their ways soon enough.”

“I said that’s enough,” Jameson said in a warning tone as he took a step toward his mother.

Sadie held a hand up. “No, Jameson, it’s okay. Penelope, I don’t care what you think of me. As you can see, everyone, your husband included, is having a marvelous time which means you failed in your attempt to ruin our opening.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I had nothing to do with that display of unprofessionalism.”

“They told us someone hired them for the explicit purpose of staging an elaborate fight. And I know that someone was you. No one else would stoop so low.” Sadie folded her arms across her chest, eyes narrowed at Penelope.

Penelope’s iciness turned to shock as she stared from Sadie to Jameson. “Are you just going to stand there and let her speak to your mother this way?”

“Yes, Mother, I am,” Jameson said in a clipped tone. “Because she’s the woman I’m in love with. And I believe her. Trying to wreck Sadie’s opening is completely within your character.”

She stared at them both, open-mouthed. “You’re taking her side over mine? Need I remind you this business has been plagued with complications and financial difficulties since its inception? Why less than a month ago, this very space had a fire due to faulty wiring.”

Jameson shook his head, holding up a hand. “Wait. How did you know the fire was caused by faulty wiring?”

Penelope blinked, looking taken aback. “I’m sure you must have mentioned it.”

“No, I’m quite sure I didn’t.”

Penelope waved a hand in the air. “Then I must have heard some talk about it in town.” She stretched her neck to look past Sadie and Jameson. “I should go. Your father’s signaling me. He’s ready to leave.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Jameson said, stone-faced

“It’s always such a pleasure to see you, Penelope,” Sadie said sweetly. “Thank you for coming out tonight to support Pemberley’s opening. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

With a final huff and a shake of her head, Penelope stalked off.

Jameson circled his arm around Sadie’s waist, placing a kiss on her forehead. “Very classy of you.”

“I won’t stoop to her level,” she said. “Do you really think she had something to do with the fire?” They’d only recently heard from the investigator that the fire was the result of a wiring issue that must’ve happened during renovations.

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t put it past her,” Jameson said.

“Sadie, there you are!” Ryleigh cried as she rushed toward them. “You left your phone in the kitchen next to mine. Lenora just called again. It looks like you have several missed calls from her.” She held out Sadie’s phone toward her.

Sadie grabbed her phone, wondering why Lenora would be calling so late on a Friday night. There was a voicemail from her agent and she pressed play.

“Sadie, I’ve been calling you all night. Please call me back when you get this. I’ll be up. I have some amazing news I can’t wait to share with you.”

Sadie looked from Ryleigh to Jameson. “I should call her back. She’s called me six times already.”

Sadie stepped away from them to call Lenora. She picked up on the second ring. “Sadie! Thank God! I have some news for you.”

“I’m sorry I missed your calls. Tonight was Pemberley’s opening.”

“Is it going well?”

“I think we’ve had a very successful opening night.”

“Well, then tonight is especially lucky for you. I have some news from New York.”

“New York? I don’t understand. I did awful at my call-back. I thought you said they decided to go with someone else.”

“They did. But the producers loved the video you sent them. Turns out they’re opening another show within the next year. It’ll be going into previews in a few months and they want you to come to New York as soon as possible.”

“Lenora, slow down. You’re not making any sense. I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“The producers are offering you a lead role in a different show. It’s the principal female dancer part. You’ll have some lines but you’ll spend some time working with an acting coach. I’m sure it’ll be no trouble for you.”

Sadie could hardly believe her ears. “They’re offering me a lead role? But—but I completely botched my New York audition. I can’t believe they’d give me a second chance.”

“They were pretty wowed by the video you sent. Apparently, despite the not-so-great call-back, they’d already been considering you for the role. But that video sealed the deal.”

“I—I don’t know what to say. I didn’t send them any—”

“Oh, sweetie, that’s my other line. I’ve got to go. Let’s sort out the details tomorrow. Enjoy the opening! We’ll chat soon. Kisses, girl!”

The call ended and she stood there, staring at her phone.

What had just happened?

“What did she want?” Jameson asked, coming up behind her.

“I don’t know,” Sadie said, shaking her head. “I’m still trying to figure it out. The gist is I’ve been offered a lead role in a New York show. Lenora kept talking about some video I submitted but I have no idea what she means.”

“I do,” Jameson said quietly. “I saw you dancing out by the pond a few weeks ago. You were so amazing I decided to record it. I sent it to the New York producers you auditioned for and explained I was a friend. I sent an email with the video telling them they were fools if they didn’t give you a second chance.” He smiled. “They saw what I did that day. You belong on that stage in New York.”

“I have to confess I got in touch with Lenora and got the producers’ contact info,” Ryleigh said, looking sheepish. “Jameson told me his idea and asked for my help. I thought we should do everything possible to help you live your dream.”

She looked from Jameson to Ryleigh, overcome with emotion.

“You believe in me that much?” she asked, staring up at Jameson.

“You’re a star and you deserve to have your dream come true.”

He circled his arms around her waist, pulling her into a long, dizzying kiss.



# Epilogue



**O**N SUNDAY NIGHT, they gathered in The Barn to celebrate a victorious opening weekend.

Sadie felt like she might burst with happiness as she sat surrounded by her family. Carlotta and Ryleigh, best friends and forever sisters. Elijah, the best little brother in the world. Grandpa Cliff and Grandma Mae, her beloved grandparents who'd given her and Elijah a new life when they'd lost everything. And Jameson, the man she'd fallen in love with, against all odds.

For better or worse, this was her forever family and she couldn't be more grateful for every one of them.

Excitement brimming inside her, Sadie couldn't wait to share her latest good news with them. She took a deep breath, clinked her wine glass with a fork, and announced, "I wanted to let you all know that we've decided—that is, Jameson's decided that—well, we're moving together to New York." She felt the blush spread through her as the table broke out in thunderous applause. Grandpa Cliff winked at Sadie when she looked his way.

“I’ve already had my Realtor put an offer on a New York apartment we both like,” Jameson said. “And since I can run my business from anywhere—it was a no-brainer.”

Shouts of congratulations broke out around the table and the conversation turned to the logistics of their move and how everyone would manage while Sadie was away.

“When do you guys leave?” Carlotta asked, taking a sip of her red wine.

“We leave in a few weeks,” Sadie said, grabbing Jameson’s hand across the table. “The show will be in rehearsals and then previews before its Broadway debut. I’ve committed to a six-month run. So it looks like I’ll be there for at least nine months. Are you guys sure you can manage without me?”

“I told you we’d all pitch in and make it work,” Elijah said, grinning at her from across the table.

“We got this,” Ryleigh agreed. “You go conquer Broadway and we’ll be here cheering you on every step of the way.”

“Grandma Mae and I can handle the bed-and-breakfast,” Carlotta said. “Ryleigh has the restaurant covered. And we can always hire someone if we need an extra hand. Sadie Barnhart, you are hereby banished to New York for nine months and I will not hear any word to the contrary.” She grinned at Sadie, tossing her tumble of dark hair over one shoulder.

“This is your time,” Grandpa Cliff said, his arm around Grandma Mae. “Go live your dream, Sadie girl. Pemberley

will still be standing strong when you come back.”

Elijah cleared his throat. “I also have some news.” His crystal blue eyes swept over the long table. “I’ve applied to St. Luke’s surgical residency program in Kansas City. So if I’m accepted, I’ll be transferring to UMKC and finishing my clinical rotations at St. Luke’s starting next year.”

“That’s amazing, Eli,” Sadie said.

“I wanted to be closer to home so I could help out whenever I have time,” he said.

“As a surgical resident I doubt you’ll have much time to spare,” Grandma Mae said. “But it’ll be nice to have you so close.”

Ryleigh’s eyes shone with happiness as she smiled at Elijah. “I’m so glad you’re moving closer to home.”

As the dining table broke out with questions for Eli about his moving plans, Sadie’s gaze fell on Jameson.

His gorgeous green eyes met hers.

And Sadie couldn’t believe this man, this life, this dream was hers.

But it was. It was all hers.

And Sadie couldn’t wait to begin the next chapter.

Later, after the merriment came to a close, Sadie took Jameson by the hand and led him back to that same spot by the pond.

Where she’d danced beneath the blue junipers.

And in the enchanting light of the crescent moon, she showed him her own blue juniper at the end of the row and told him of the special meaning it held.

How this tree had given her hope and a reason to believe in better days ahead. A sacred promise made to a broken ten-year-old girl who'd just lost her entire world.

And as they stood beneath its magnificent foliage, Jameson took both of Sadie's hands in his and made her another sacred promise.

Of a dream for their intertwining futures and a love that would last a lifetime.



*Stacey Rae Charles*

ROMANCE WRITER

# About the Author

Stacey is a passionate connoisseur of captivating tales and enchanting romances. From thrilling epics to breathtaking romances with a magical twist (romantasy, anyone?), she's an enthusiast of all things that make her heart skip a beat. Nothing brings her more joy than a story that leaves her with a blissful sigh, knowing that true love conquers all.

When she's not lost in the pages of a mesmerizing book, you'll find her dancing between reality and fantasy, conjuring up her own tales with a feverish fervor. Her fingertips tapping across the keyboard as she races to capture the ethereal ideas that swirl in her mind like vibrant stardust.

But Stacey's world would be incomplete without her loving family and her adorable sidekick, Gracie, the petite West Highland Terrier with an attitude as fiery as the sun. Together, they explore the wonders of life and share moments of joy that warm her heart—even during the coldest Midwest winters.

Join Stacey on her journey through the spellbinding realms of imagination, love, and adventure. With every turn of the page, she invites you to be part of a magical escape, where dreams come alive and happiness awaits at the end of every story.

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