

FORTUNE COOKIE

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FORTUNE COOKIE

A CULINARY MYSTERY

JOSI S. KILPACK



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Summary: Sadie Hoffmiller is busily adding the final touches to her wedding plans, but the arrival of a mysterious letter that bears a San Francisco postmark and no return address could change everything. The only person Sadie knows in San Francisco is her older sister, Wendy, whom she hasn't seen or heard from since their mother's funeral nearly fifteen years ago.

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To Madison

*May your beautiful wings take you everywhere you want to go
but never forget their way home.*

CHAPTER 1



Sadie Hoffmiller had always liked things to be just so. “A place for everything and everything in its place” was efficient, consistent, and reduced both stress and loss. Certainly the investigations she’d been involved in over the last few years had shaken up some of her confidence in being able to keep things as they should be, but for the most part, she felt the changes that the disruptions had caused were for the better. She felt more capable of recovering from difficulties, more aware of what went on around her, and increasingly confident in her ability to take life as it came and respond accordingly. Even the lingering threat on her life was something she had come to terms with, knowing she might one day face it but hoping that perhaps the threat had disappeared.

Despite her confidence at being able to fix things gone wrong, however, she still preferred order to chaos when she had any say in the matter, and of all things Sadie should be able to control, her own wedding was it. Which is why the four-by-nine-inch envelope sitting in the middle of her kitchen table terrified her.

The wedding invitations she’d spent the last two days preparing were stacked on the entry table of her living room waiting for her to

take them to the post office in the morning so they would go out before the Fourth of July holiday. She hoped the post office would have a wedding-specific stamp that would be the perfect final touch. Even if the people living out of state couldn't be there, she wanted them to celebrate the occasion with her, and completing all the invitations before the festivities of the national holiday had been a goal she took great pride in accomplishing.

And yet the lone envelope on the table had been sent *to* her. Sadie had discovered it in today's mail this afternoon and had been working up the courage to open it for hours. Was it mocking her? Egging her on? Or simply staring back at her as a reminder that not everything in her life could be controlled and anticipated?

There was a return address in San Francisco along with the name Doang in the upper left-hand corner. While the name was unfamiliar, Sadie only knew one person who lived in San Francisco: her older sister, Wendy, whom she hadn't seen for years. Perhaps Doang was Wendy's current last name. Sadie worried that Wendy had somehow learned about the wedding, and though some of Sadie's chronic curiosity was certainly triggered by the unexpected letter, it hadn't been enough to overcome her reluctance to invite her sister back into her life. Especially now.

The timer on the stove buzzed, and Sadie pulled the final pan of jam bars from the oven; she'd managed to come up with a dozen tasks around the house to delay the inevitable opening of that envelope. She'd been trying not to bake after six o'clock in the evening—she had a size twelve wedding dress to fit into, after all, and at the age of fifty-eight, she couldn't simply eat salads for a week to drop a few pounds before the big day—but the letter had knocked her off the proverbial wagon, and so she got a start on the variety

of cookies she'd promised for the Garrison Fourth of July bake sale. That Wendy disliked their mother's jam bar recipe was purely coincidental.

The digital time display on her microwave read 9:44 p.m. Tomorrow would be a full day of both wedding and holiday preparations now that she was home and sufficiently recovered from her vacation-turned-investigation in Utah last week. Pete's daughters and their families were coming up for the Fourth, giving Sadie the chance to continue building those relationships. The wedding was only three and a half weeks away, and there was still so much to do. *Mrs. Peter Cunningham. Wow.*

Her eyes strayed back to the envelope on the table, and now that she had nothing left to distract her, she felt ridiculous for having put this off for the better part of the day. Resolved, Sadie grabbed her letter opener from the drawer of the desk in her living room and then picked up the envelope with her other hand. The handwriting looked different from what she expected—that is, if she'd expected this at all, which she hadn't.

"Wendy," Sadie said out loud. Her sister's name sounded strange on her tongue. It was sad that they were so disconnected, and yet Sadie had little motivation to reach out to change what had always been a difficult relationship. Wendy was five years older than Sadie and the source of many frightening memories from Sadie's childhood, including broken and missing toys, finding dead spiders in her oatmeal, and on more than one occasion being locked in a closet for hours while their parents were gone.

Wendy left home at seventeen, creating a void in the lives of Sadie's parents that was never remedied. Despite all the chaos and difficulty she'd brought into the family, Wendy was still their daughter, and they'd always hoped to be a part of her life. Now and then,

she'd contact them to ask for money or to throw a tantrum about one issue or another, but for the most part she stayed out of their lives.

Sadie hadn't seen Wendy since their mother's funeral almost fifteen years earlier. Wendy had only stayed in town for four hours, long enough to put her rose on the casket and rifle through Mom's jewelry box. When their father died just four years ago, Sadie had tracked her sister down—still living in San Francisco—only to have Wendy say she couldn't get away for the funeral but she'd send flowers. She didn't send any flowers, and Sadie and her brother, Jack, followed their father's casket from the church without even a whisper about Wendy's absence. After that, Sadie had stopped sending Christmas cards that had never been reciprocated, she stopped marking Wendy's birthday on her calendar at the start of each new year, and each time she thought about her sister, she forced herself to think of something else. For all intents and purposes, Sadie didn't have a sister and never really had. She hadn't even told Pete about her, other than admitting Wendy existed.

Sadie inhaled deeply, hoping to control the growing anxiety that thoughts of Wendy induced. The scent of baking in the air didn't relax her like it usually did. No doubt she would eat a dozen bars herself before finally going to bed tonight. She'd faced off with murderers and psychopaths during the last few years, but her sister could send her into a panic with just a simple letter Sadie hadn't even read yet.

Sadie slid the letter opener into the corner of the envelope. The thin blade sliced smoothly through the paper with barely a whisper. She pulled out a sheet of lined paper that revealed a newspaper article enfolded within it. Intrigued yet hesitant, she unfolded the newsprint and was a bit confused by the partial coupon for Fourth of July flower arrangements until she realized that must be the back side. She turned the article over and read the heading.

Woman found dead in Mission District apartment

Sadie's heart rate increased as she read the opening lines about a burned and badly decomposed body being found after an anonymous call to 911 about an apartment fire. Sadie clenched her eyes shut as the house seemed to shift beneath her, but when she opened them, they wouldn't focus on the rest of the words, as though they were unwilling to read more. Unable to process it, she put the article down and pushed it away from her, her head tingling. After catching her breath, she turned her attention to the lined paper she still held in her shaky hand.

Ms. Hoffmiller,

My name is Ji Edward Doang. My natural mother was your sister, Wendy Wright Penrose, and I found your address among her possessions. Her body was found in her apartment June 25th, and I thought you would want to know. I am working to clear her apartment before the tenth of the month and determine what to do with her remains when the autopsy is complete. If you are available, I would appreciate your help as it is a big job and I am quite busy with family and work. If I don't hear from you, I will understand. I was not close with her either.

Wonderful Jam Bars

Crust

- 1½ cups flour
- ½ cup quick-cooking oats, uncooked
- ½ cup sugar
- ¾ cup butter or margarine, softened
- ½ teaspoon baking soda

Topping

- ¾ cup flaked coconut
- ¾ cup chopped nuts (walnuts work best)
- ¼ cup flour
- ¼ cup packed brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons butter or margarine, softened
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 to 1½ cups strawberry, raspberry, or apricot jam

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease the bottom and sides of a 9x13-inch baking dish.

Combine all crust ingredients in a large mixing bowl. Using an electric mixer, beat on low speed 1 to 2 minutes, scraping the bowl often until mixture is crumbly. Using your hands, press mixture into the bottom of greased pan. Bake for 18 to 20 minutes or until edges are lightly browned.

While crust is baking, combine coconut, nuts, flour, brown sugar, butter, and cinnamon in a mixing bowl. Beat at low speed, scraping the sides of the bowl often until well mixed. It will be crumbly.

Remove crust from oven and spread evenly with jam while crust is still hot, almost to the edges. Sprinkle topping mixture over jam. Return pan to the oven and bake an additional 18 to 20 minutes, or until top is lightly browned. Allow bars to cool completely in the pan on a wire rack before cutting into squares.

Makes 15 to 24 bars, depending on size. Serve warm with ice cream or cooled with whipped topping.

CHAPTER 2



After reading the letter three times, Sadie texted Pete that she was coming over, and although he replied to ask her what was wrong, she simply told him she'd explain when she got there. What she needed to talk about wasn't text-message material.

The porch light was on when she pulled into the driveway, and upon reaching his front door with a plate of jam bars in hand, she took a breath and knocked three times. The decision to come at all hadn't been an entirely conscious one; she'd just known she needed to talk to him, needed his advice and support, and so here she was, banging on his door long after the sun had set.

A night breeze made the realty sign planted in Pete's front yard sway back and forth, adding a creaking sound to the chirp of crickets that accompanied the summer night. Both Pete and Sadie had put their homes up for sale a week earlier with the idea that they would buy something new together—a symbol of their new start. Potential buyers had even come through both homes—one for Sadie and three for Pete, who had a two-car garage *and* double ovens—but no offers had been made on either home so far.

The click of the lock drew Sadie's attention, and she straightened

as Pete pulled the door open, shrugging his shoulder into a flannel shirt; he had on a T-shirt underneath. His salt-and-pepper hair was mussed, as though he'd already been in bed. His beard was perfectly trimmed, and his hazel eyes were clear and searching. She felt exposed beneath his gaze. Sadie's hair had a little more pepper than his did and was currently styled in a sleek A-line stacked bob that showed off the different shades of gray she'd come to terms with.

"I brought you some jam bars," she said, holding out the plastic-covered plate while he began buttoning up his shirt. There had been twelve bars on the plate when she left home, but it was a seven-minute drive to his house, and Sadie had managed to eat two in that time. She'd need to vacuum her car tomorrow; jam bars were crumbly and not the kind of treat one should typically eat while driving.

Pete stepped onto the porch and closed the door behind him, watching her closely as he took the plate. "You didn't come over to give me cookies."

Sadie attempted a smile but knew it looked false when Pete pulled his eyebrows together.

"Sadie," he said with a mixture of reprimand, fatigue, and concern. "What's going on?"

Sadie held his eyes, relieved that he knew her so well. Why she couldn't come clean on her own, she didn't know, but this situation had become a blur of emotion and frozen feelings. Wishes and remembrances were twisted together like those parasitical vines that choked entire trees to death in the rain forests.

She reached into the back pocket of her jeans and withdrew the folded envelope. She held it out to him, and he transferred the plate of cookies to one hand so he could take the letter with the other. Sadie turned and sat on the top step of Pete's porch, looking out

across the darkened neighborhood and wrapping her arms around herself.

Pete sat next to her, placing the plate behind them. She didn't watch but knew each motion he made due to the swish of the papers as he unfolded them. The minutes, which couldn't have been more than two, stretched into the night as she waited for him to finish. She knew he was done reading when she heard him refolding the papers.

"You've never told me much about your sister," Pete commented. His tone was casual but Sadie knew better. He seemed to be avoiding a direct question regarding her out-of-character actions tonight, and she sensed it was because he was leaving the direction of the conversation up to her. If she said "Never mind, good night," he would probably let her leave. She appreciated the consideration but needed to talk about this; she should have told him about Wendy before now. She rubbed her upper arms, though it wasn't cold, and then, unable to find the words to explain, she shrugged as though it was perfectly acceptable not to talk about someone who shared your DNA to the person you were about to marry.

"But Jack did."

Sadie whipped her head around to look at Pete. "What?"

"I'd asked you about her a couple of times but you always managed to change the subject, so when Jack and I went fishing last summer up at Big T, I asked him to fill me in."

Sadie looked across the neighborhood again, smoothing her hair behind her ear and unsure whether she was annoyed that Pete had gone behind her back to learn about this part of her life—though she did that kind of thing all the time—or relieved that he already knew. "What did Jack tell you?"

“That she was terrible to you, well, to everyone in your family, but you especially.”

Me especially, Sadie thought. Her chest tightened. *Me especially*. For Pete’s benefit she nodded to make sure he knew she’d heard him. “I’m sure she was mentally ill,” Sadie said after a few more seconds of silence ate up more of the night. “Borderline personality disorder, possibly, though I wouldn’t rule out bipolar, schizophrenic, and maybe histrionic as well.”

“Diagnosed?”

Sadie shook her head. “I’ve read enough and met enough people with similarities to her that I’ve made my armchair-psychiatrist determinations. It helps me feel a bit more peace with how she treated me—us—to know she had limitations.”

“Jack said she left home young.”

“She was seventeen; I was twelve.” Sadie appreciated the cautious push of Pete’s questions that allowed her to remain as unemotional as possible. As a former police detective, Pete was well-trained in gathering information, and she was glad for the almost formal feel of the conversation—it made it easier for her somehow, kept things distant.

A car turned down Pete’s street, and they both raised their hands to wave at whomever was returning home.

Sadie wrapped her arms around herself again and continued, “I never asked what the final fight was about. It happened when I was at school, and Mom was still crying when I got home. I was so relieved that Wendy was gone, though it took almost a year for me to believe she wasn’t coming back.”

“Jack said your parents wouldn’t let you talk badly about her.”

Sadie shook her head. “She was still their daughter, and they didn’t want us creating an air of negativity about her while she was

gone in case she came back. Since we didn't discuss the *hard* parts about Wendy, we simply didn't talk about her at all. When she did come up, we spoke of her the way you might talk about a great-aunt who lives too far away to visit."

"Did your parents know how she treated you?" Pete asked. "Jack said he'd never been sure, probably because, like you said, no one talked about her much."

"They knew some of the things she did and suspected other things that no one could prove." An owl hooted in the distance, and the sound made her shiver. Or maybe she just wanted Pete to put his arm around her shoulders, which he did. Sadie leaned into him, comforted by his warmth and the now-familiar, lingering scent of his cologne. "They tried to keep the two of us separate as much as possible. It helped, I think."

"Any idea why she singled you out?"

"She was my parent's first child, and the only one for five years. My parents didn't think they'd have any other children due to some complications of Wendy's birth. From what I've heard, Wendy was always difficult, even as an infant. She had digestive issues that required hospital stays and things—not that any of that is her fault, but it made her early years difficult ones and her temperament, as my mother described it, was one of perpetual discomfort. Then I came along—a surprise child my parents never thought they'd have. I was a good baby." She shrugged, hating how braggy she felt but, well, it was what had happened. "I was healthy and smiled a lot. I slept through the night after six weeks, and as I got older, I liked to make people happy."

"Everything she didn't do," Pete said.

"I guess so," Sadie said, feeling guilty all over again, as though it was her fault that adults had doted on her, that she was affectionate

and precocious and obedient while Wendy was combative and intolerant and whiney. Sadie joined Brownies when she was seven and earned badges faster than most girls in her troop. She'd loved to learn and accomplish goals, which equated to her excelling at most things she put her mind to. She sang solos in church, won art contests at school, was a good softball player on her pony league team, and always had a lot of friends.

Every triumph of her childhood, however, was punctuated with the memories of Wendy's retaliation: paint in her shoes, shredded homework, a dozen cupcakes she'd baked thrown against the kitchen wall. One time, Wendy had "accidentally" spilled hot wax from a candle on Sadie's leg, resulting in second-degree burns that prevented Sadie from going on a camping trip with their church youth group. Another time, she slammed the car door on Sadie's foot the day before Sadie's softball tournament.

Wendy never accepted responsibility—she either denied she'd done those things or explained them away as accidents—but she took a dark kind of satisfaction in seeing Sadie hurt, embarrassed, scared, or upset and was quite skilled at creating those situations.

"It was such a relief when she left home," Sadie admitted quietly, as though her parents could still overhear and remind her not to dwell on things that couldn't be changed. "I don't like to think about her."

"I can see why," Pete said, rubbing his hand against her arm, which had broken out in goose bumps. "She didn't treat Jack the same way?"

Sadie shook her head slowly. "I've never been sure why not. Maybe because he was the youngest or because he was a boy, or maybe as a girl I was more threatening to her position or something, but she didn't target him the way she did me, though she wasn't nice

to him either.” There was a time when Sadie had been jealous of the way Jack seemed to exist below Wendy’s radar. It made her wonder what was wrong with *her*, why Wendy hated her so much. But she was also grateful that Jack hadn’t been through the same things she’d endured.

Sadie waited for Pete to say something more, ask her a question or lead the conversation, but he remained silent. After several seconds had passed, she said, “I know I should go to San Francisco and help her son, but I really don’t want to.”

“Why not? She won’t be there.”

Sadie knew he’d meant to give her some kind of comfort, perhaps help her acknowledge that going to San Francisco wouldn’t put her at risk. Wendy was *dead*. But crossing into Wendy’s world made Sadie feel the same vulnerability she remembered from her childhood. “But your family is coming in for the Fourth of July, and I still have cookies to make for the bake sale and wedding plans to finalize and a house to sell and . . . a lot of things to do.”

She liked the normalcy of her life right now; she liked her relationship with Pete, which had started when Sadie’s neighbor had been found dead behind her home and Sadie had involved herself in finding answers. They’d been through a lot since then and had found this good, comfortable, and assuring place together. Sadie looked forward to becoming Pete’s wife. Wendy’s interference with that happiness was unwelcome, though Sadie felt guilty for feeling that way too. Shouldn’t Sadie feel so terrible about Wendy’s death that she would want to do right by her? Or at least by her son?

“Then don’t go,” Pete said. “This Jee or Jye or however you say his name said he’d understand if you didn’t want to help. Did you know about her son?”

Another wave of guilt washed over her. “We were never certain

if he was real or not. She didn't tell my parents about him until he was three. She claimed he'd been bitten by a neighbor's dog, and she needed money for the medical bills. My parents gave her five thousand dollars and asked if they could come out and help. She said she'd let them know, but then she didn't call for two years until she was behind on her rent and she and her son would be evicted if my parents didn't help her out again. Once again they sent money and extracted a promise that Wendy would bring him to visit. She'd called him Eddie though."

"His letter said his middle name was Edward," Pete commented.

Sadie nodded; she'd noticed that too. "She didn't come and the number she'd given my parents was disconnected soon after that. The next time we heard from her she said Eddie was living with his father—his father is Vietnamese or Chinese or something. She never sent pictures, and in time I became all but convinced that he was something she'd made up."

Pete nodded as though he understood, but Sadie wondered how that could even be possible. She wasn't sure *she* understood. "You could send her son money to help with the funeral costs and be done with it. You'd still be doing something to help, and it sounds like the financial situation is a concern for him. It's probably the main reason he contacted you, for help with the expenses."

Sadie was quiet. She *could* just send money and explain that was all she could do; the idea had certainly crossed her mind. But . . . "He's reaching out to me, and he *is* family. My parents would want me to at least try to establish a relationship with him. Wendy never gave them the chance to have one."

"And maybe helping pack up her apartment will help you find some understanding for Wendy's behavior. You've lived with a child's impression of a cruel person, and maybe seeing her through

her things and talking to the people in her life will give you a new grown-up perspective.”

Sadie had gotten so good at living in the moment after her first husband had died two decades ago and left her a widow with years of life to recalculate that she rarely allowed the past to overwhelm her like it was doing tonight. She was surprised that even decades after Wendy’s abuse, the memories were still so raw. She appreciated everything Pete was saying, but didn’t think he understood the level of trauma Wendy had brought into Sadie’s childhood.

“When I was four years old, Wendy tricked me into eating some laxatives by telling me they were candy. I ended up in the hospital for almost a week with severe dehydration and an intestinal blockage. It’s one of my earliest memories—being alone in a dark hospital room, wishing my mother was there while worrying that when she came the next day she’d bring Wendy with her. I was really little, but I understood that Wendy could have killed me. To this day I’m not sure if that was her goal, but in the back of my mind it seems as though it was.”

Pete pulled Sadie closer and kissed the top of her head. “She sounds like a nightmare.”

“She was certainly the source of a lot of them.”

They sat in silence for nearly a minute, Sadie reliving the many fears Wendy had induced, things Sadie hadn’t thought about for years and wished she wasn’t thinking about now.

Pete’s voice broke through the quiet. “It also sounds like her life after she left your family wasn’t a happy one, and it ended dramatically.”

For a moment Sadie wasn’t sure what he meant, then remembered the heading of the article: *WOMAN FOUND DEAD IN MISSION DISTRICT APARTMENT*. “I didn’t read the whole article,” she admitted,

leaving out the part about how her eyes wouldn't focus on the words. "Did it say how she died?"

"It said the police were considering a variety of possibilities. Her body was lit on fire several weeks after she died, though, which is strange. The article was written a couple of days after her body was discovered and didn't have much conclusive information. Maybe the police have established cause of death by now."

Sadie shuddered at the grisly details. "Nobody deserves anything like that." *Had Wendy been murdered?* she wondered. She'd been involved in too many murder investigations not to consider the possibility. Burning the body could have been about destroying evidence.

"I bet there are follow-up articles we could look at. And maybe we can talk to the detectives working on the case in San Francisco—I might have an in with the department that could get us some additional information. Her body was discovered just over a week ago, so forensics ought to have more information by now."

Sadie *would* like to know more about what had happened, but did she have to go to San Francisco to get that information? Couldn't she stay right here, in her own world, and gather information online and over the phone while Wendy's son closed out her life? Sadie could send money to help with expenses and fulfill her familial obligation that way.

"If you decide to go, I'll come with you," Pete said.

Sadie looked up at him. "You would?"

He smiled and tucked the same strand of hair she'd been fussing with behind her ear. "Of course I would." He brushed the backs of his fingers along her jawline, initiating a new round of goose bumps. "We could take in some of the sights while we're there. It's a great city even if the reason we're going isn't a happy one. We could make the best of it, and you could meet your nephew."

“What about the holiday? Cancelling at the last minute isn’t going to win me any points with your girls.” It had been a slow process building a relationship with Pete’s daughters, both of whom lived about an hour away. Their mother, Pat, had died five years ago, and Sadie’s life must look disturbingly dramatic from where they stood, only seeing bits and pieces of it as Pete hurried from one situation to another helping Sadie out of several dangerous events. It had to be even more difficult for them to see their father in love with someone other than their mother. They were trying, though, and Sadie was grateful for that. She hated the idea that Wendy would be the reason she would cancel their plans at the last minute.

“We could go after the Fourth.” Pete lifted the letter he still held. “I’m sure . . . Eddie wants to spend the holiday with his family too. If we left on the fifth, for instance, there’d still be plenty of time for us to get things taken care of before the deadline he talks about in his letter. Maybe Jack will come too.”

Sadie looked at the envelope in his hand. The thought of entering Wendy’s world, even without her in it, was still overwhelming. But she could do it with Pete there beside her. Jack would make it even better.

“Sadie, she can’t hurt you anymore,” Pete whispered.

She looked away from those penetrating eyes and watched the realty sign sway in the breeze. Even after all these years, and evidence of Wendy’s death in black and white, Sadie wasn’t sure she believed him.