

# WEDDING CAKE

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# WEDDING CAKE

A CULINARY MYSTERY

JOSI S. KILPACK



SHADOW  
MOUNTAIN

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*To Jana Erickson*

*The woman behind the curtain at Deseret Book and Shadow Mountain who has watched over this series with a careful eye from start to finish. Much of this series' success is directly linked to her efforts in making it the best it can be. I am blessed and grateful—as is Sadie—to have her.*



## AUTHOR'S WARNING



*Do not read this book until you have read the first eleven books in the series!*

Up to this point, each book in the Sadie Hoffmiller Culinary Mysteries has been a stand-alone volume, meaning they could be read in pretty much any order without giving away the mystery of prior books in the series. Granted, this got a bit trickier as the series progressed, and there are several characters who didn't show up in later books because doing so would give away another story. However, with book twelve, the gloves are off.

I am excited to bring back some of my favorite characters who have waited so patiently for me to get to this point so that I can catch you up on their stories and lay to rest any lingering questions. Because of that, I really, really, really, really, really mean it when I ask that you not read this book until you have read all the other ones. It's brimming with spoilers, and I would hate for your experience with those other stories to be ruined. Plus, if you wait to read this one, you'll better understand the threads that come together to make this story happen.

*Author's Warning*

If you have *not* read the prior volumes, please do so before you turn the next page. 😊

If you *have* read the prior volumes, then happy reading! I hope you love Sadie's last ride. It's a doozy.

Josi



## CHAPTER 1



Dead birds were the antithesis of a wedding day, which should be all about hope and goodness. That's why Sadie was making tiny tulle bags of birdseed for her wedding guests to throw instead of rice. She'd heard that rice could distend a bird's stomach, resulting in death if they ate too much, and though she'd never read scientific proof of such a thing, she didn't want to take the chance.

*Two days*, she thought as she finished tying a gossamer bow on one of the favors. *Two days and I will be Mrs. Peter Cunningham.* Her whole body shivered in excitement and anticipation of what lay ahead for her. For them.

Sadie's phone rang, and she pivoted from the kitchen counter to the kitchen table where her phone vibrated against the lacquered top.

She glanced at the caller ID and smiled before answering. "Hi, sweetie."

"Hey, Mom," her daughter, Breanna, replied. There was a lot of noise in the background, and Sadie imagined her daughter—tall, dark, and beautiful—standing in a corner of the Heathrow airport

in London, plugging one ear. “We’re checked in and will start boarding in about twenty minutes.”

“Wonderful.” Sadie allowed a break from the myriad wedding details and sat in the worn brown recliner in her living room. It was her favorite place in the house, and she settled into the squishy softness of its embrace with a sigh indicative of her long day. Forty-eight hours—well, forty, really—and she would be Pete’s *wife*. She could hardly believe that after three years of what could only be classified as a tumultuous dating relationship, they were finally getting married. “What time do you land in Minneapolis?”

“Around four o’clock in the morning your time,” Breanna said. She stifled a yawn, reminding Sadie that it was about 2:00 a.m. in London right now—8:30 p.m. here in Colorado. Since it was July, the sun was just setting, casting orange shadows through the big front window of Sadie’s house. The red-eye flight from London to Denver wasn’t the best itinerary available—in fact, it might have been the very worst—but it had allowed Liam, Breanna’s husband of only six weeks, to attend an important event in London that evening.

“I hope you’ll be able to sleep on the plane,” Sadie said.

“I’m not worried about that,” Breanna said. “I’m *so* tired. The flight is nine hours, which will give me plenty of time to rest before the layover. We should be to Garrison by noon or so.”

“Wonderful,” Sadie said, hoping the jet lag wouldn’t be too bad and they’d be recovered by the time the ceremony took place. “Pete swapped out the bed in your old room for a queen-sized bed from his house. It’s got new sheets and everything.” Sadie liked Liam quite a lot, but he’d grown up wealthy and privileged, and she worried that her modest home wouldn’t meet his expectations. “I even bought new towels.” They matched the bedspread and the new curtains

Sadie had put up; she'd been going for an English countryside look and then worried it would look pretentious.

"Don't stress too much," Breanna said with a smile in her voice. "We're looking forward to staying at the house and having more time with you. Shawn's there already?"

"He flew in this morning," Sadie said, smiling in anticipation of having both her children—and Liam—under her roof at the same time. It didn't happen very often, what with Breanna living on another continent and Shawn finishing up his degree at Michigan State. "He's at Pete's bachelor party right now."

"Oh, a *bachelor* party. And you're not spying on them?"

They joked for a bit about what the men might be doing. Sadie kept to herself that she knew *exactly* what they were doing: barbequing Omaha steaks, drinking imported beer, and playing poker until midnight at the home of one of Pete's police department buddies. It had only taken a quick scroll through Pete's text messages and eavesdropping on a couple of conversations when he thought she was occupied with something else to assure her that she had nothing to worry about on this last night of "debauchery"—not that her investigation meant she didn't trust him. It was just a habit, good or bad, depending on the circumstances of its employ.

It had been an intense few weeks. Pete's house had sold and would close after their honeymoon. He had been spending a lot of time preparing for the move, and Sadie was glad he'd gone ahead with a night of cards and food with his buddies. Sadie's house still had the realty sign in the front yard, so they would be living here for now. After the honeymoon, they would step up their efforts to find a new place of their own and then, maybe, she would lower the price on her home to encourage it to sell in the unpredictable market.

“Well, I better go,” Breanna said on the phone. “If I use the restroom now and don’t drink too much water on the flight, I might be able to avoid the horrible bathroom on the plane *and* sleep straight through.”

Sadie said good-bye with a smile that stretched all the way to her toes. Sixteen hours from now she would get to hug her daughter and new son-in-law. And twenty-four hours after *that*, she’d be making vows to the man she had come to love so much. Still grinning, Sadie pushed up from the chair, then flinched slightly at the tugging pain in her right side, just below her ribs.

Three weeks ago she’d been stitched up following *the* most harrowing experience of her life, which was saying a lot based on the number of harrowing experiences she’d survived in recent years. She’d healed better than the doctors had expected, but she was still sore and had to be careful about moving too quickly. Sadie credited her quick healing to the level of endorphins running through her bloodstream as the wedding plans had picked up speed.

Sadie returned to the kitchen and finished tying up the rest of the birdseed packets. When the last bow was tied, she put the tiny bundles in a basket and set it by the front door next to the monogrammed napkins so that she’d know right where they were when she was running around crazy in the hours before the ceremony.

She scratched “birdseed favors” off her to-do list and looked at the next item: “update guest list.” She sat down on one of the kitchen chairs and pulled the guest list in front of her. There was a purple check mark next to the guests who had responded that they would be in attendance and a black X next to those who had RSVP’d that they couldn’t make it. Sadie had expected most of their out-of-state friends and family wouldn’t be able to attend the ceremony, but she’d

loved all the phone calls of congratulations and catching up that sending the invitations had garnered. Everyone was so happy for her and Pete, and she loved hearing the well wishes over and over again.

There were a few names unmarked on her list, including Ji, her recently discovered nephew. He wasn't sure he could get away from his restaurant in San Francisco but hadn't yet said he *wouldn't* be there. She still held hope that he, and perhaps his daughters, would be able to attend.

There were half a dozen other guests she hadn't heard from, and she considered whether or not she should follow up with them. She didn't want to put anyone on the spot, but what if their invitations had been lost in the mail? She'd feel terrible if they learned about the wedding later and believed she hadn't included them. Or what if they'd tried to get in touch with her but called an old phone number, not realizing she'd put her new number on the invitation? If they hadn't received the invitation at all, they might not even have her new number.

There was still time to make a few calls tonight—at least to those not on the East Coast—but was it worth the possibility of an awkward conversation if they simply hadn't cared enough to respond? She tapped her pen on the paper—*decisions, decisions*. She needed to give North Hampton—the reception hall where the wedding would be held—and the caterers a final guest count by noon tomorrow.

Her phone's text message alert chime interrupted her thoughts. She picked up the phone and noted that though the texter came up as UNKNOWN, the area code indicated it was someone local.

*Unknown:* Hi, Sadie.

*Sadie:* Hi, who's this?

*Unknown:* You don't know? I'm hurt.

*Sadie:* Your name didn't come up on my contact list so you'll have to tell me. ☺

*Unknown:* Think about it for a minute. Do you really not know who this is?

Sadie furrowed her brow as she remembered some advice Pete had given her almost two years ago when she'd disconnected her landline, forwarded her mail to a PO Box, installed an alarm system for her home, and gotten her first private cell phone number, which she only shared with select people.

"Don't answer any calls or texts from unknown numbers," Pete had said. "I'll look them up, and when you know who it is you can decide whether you want to call them back. Don't take any chances."

As time had moved forward, Sadie had bit by bit given up the protective measures. She felt a little silly for thinking about Pete's advice now since she'd sent her new number out with her wedding invitations to dozens of people—this unknown caller was surely one of them. But that didn't sit quite right. Most of the people in her life knew that she'd had some difficult times; they wouldn't play with her anxieties, would they?

Her phone chimed again, and she regarded it an additional moment before picking it up.

*Unknown:* You're not even going to guess? I thought you'd missed me.

Annoyed at the interruption but determined to get to the bottom of it through proactive measures, Sadie took the phone with her across the room where she sat down at her desk and opened

her laptop. She typed the unknown phone number into the Google search bar and scrolled through the links until she found one that would give her the origination information about the owner of the phone number.

The link didn't give names, but it did tell her that the number was registered through an AT&T wireless store in Fort Collins, Colorado—the closest large city to Garrison—and that the account had been opened in 2002. Not only was the caller someone local, it was someone who'd had the same number for more than a decade. That should give her some comfort, but it didn't give her as much as she'd have liked.

Someone local would *definitely* know of the struggles Sadie had had since they were the reason she'd lived away from home for several months. Why would they tease her?

"This is ridiculous," Sadie said, standing up from the desk and heading back to the kitchen table and her to-do list for tomorrow. She wanted to make sure it was complete before she turned in for the night.

Ridiculous or not, however, her anxiety was triggered, and she felt tense. In search of a remedy, her eyes were drawn to the pan of rice pudding still on the stove; she crossed the room toward it. Shawn had requested his favorite meal for lunch today—Evil Chicken—and she'd made enough rice to make rice pudding for dessert with the leftovers. Shawn had left for the bachelor party before the rice pudding was ready, so she'd enjoyed a bowl herself and had been waiting for the rest of it to cool before she put it in the fridge. She really shouldn't have a second bowl, especially this late at night, but she knew the creamy dessert would help her calm down and focus—good food always did.

Sadie took a bite of the still-warm perfection while expertly pushing the feelings of tension from her mind. It was all about compartmentalization and she was not going to give the obnoxious texter more power than he or she deserved. Especially when so many other things needed her attention.

She scanned the longer to-do list for the wedding to see if she'd missed anything, then set it aside and looked at the shorter list she'd made just for tomorrow. Had she left off anything that would need her attention? In fact, she had! With a smile, she wrote, "Clear out space in bathroom for Pete" and felt her stomach flip-flop at the thought of how soon they would be sharing the master bathroom. The master bedroom.

*Holy moly, this is happening!*

The chime of another text message shattered her glitter-tipped thoughts, and Sadie's eyes snapped to her phone still on the computer desk. The tension returned. She looked at the clock—it was just after 9:00 p.m.—then reminded herself that this newest text could very well be from someone else. Perhaps one of the guests who hadn't yet confirmed their attendance. Or maybe it was Pete texting to tell her he loved her.

Sadie pushed away from the kitchen table and walked toward the phone. The screen had gone black by the time she reached it. She picked it up and slid her finger across the screen to wake it up.

*Unknown:* Didn't I tell you that you'd never be free of me?

*Jane!*

The name came unbidden to Sadie's mind, and her breath caught in her throat. Her heart began to race, and the tenuous



optimism she'd felt faded fast. She'd become so used to not thinking of the woman who had threatened her life in Boston—it had been almost two years, after all—that it was a shock to suddenly jump to that conclusion. She immediately tried to dismiss it.

There were several people who held Sadie responsible for the consequences they'd faced after being caught in a variety of criminal behavior—it could be one of them. But Jane was the only one who had gotten away, so to speak. And Jane *had* said those exact words: “You’ll never be free of me.” Wouldn’t it be just like her to wait until two days before Sadie’s wedding—on an evening when Sadie would be home alone—to make good on that threat?

Sadie took a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself. Pete would want her to call him about this. She began toggling to the keypad on her phone.

*Did I lock the doors after Shawn had left for the party?*

She told herself, again, not to overreact. It was probably nothing. A moment later, the squeak of a floorboard froze her in place. Her head snapped up, but her eyes stared blankly at the cabinets in front of her.

*This is not happening two days before my wedding!*

Sadie felt the warmth of another person standing behind her at the precise moment something suddenly covered her eyes. She screamed, dropped her phone, and grabbed at the hands that were blinding her and pulling her backward.

A throaty whisper in her ear nearly paralyzed her. “Guess who?”

## Rice Pudding

- 1½ cups milk
- 1 (12-ounce) can evaporated milk
- 2 eggs, slightly beaten
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ⅔ cup sugar
- 2 cups cooked rice
- Dash of nutmeg
- Dash of cinnamon
- Dash of cloves
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- ½ cup raisins (optional)

In a small saucepan over medium-high heat, combine milks and cook 10 minutes, stirring constantly until scalded. Be careful not to let milks boil. (You can also heat milks in a microwave-safe bowl for approximately 1½ minutes.)

Crack eggs into a small bowl and mix with a fork. Set aside.

In a 3-quart saucepan, whisk together cornstarch, salt, and sugar. Add hot milk mixture, whisking constantly until well blended. Reduce heat to medium and stir consistently until mixture thickens slightly. (It's okay if it comes to a boil, but reduce heat if mixture becomes frothy and risks boiling over.)

Trade whisk for a wooden spoon and add rice. Bring to a full boil, stirring consistently. Remove from heat.

Pour approximately ½ cup of the hot mixture into the eggs, stirring rapidly to combine. Return egg mixture to hot milk and rice mixture and stir until mixture thickens. If the mixture doesn't thicken within a minute or two, return to heat for another minute. Stir in spices and vanilla. Adjust spices to taste. Add raisins, if desired.

Pudding can be served warm or chilled. Store leftovers in the fridge.

## WEDDING CAKE

Note: To plump raisins, either put them in a colander over a pan of boiling water or put them in a microwave-safe bowl, cover with water, and heat for 30 seconds; drain.

Note: This recipe works great with cold rice from the fridge.

Makes 6 servings.

## CHAPTER 2



Sadie threw her elbow back as hard as she could and hit solid flesh, then she kicked backward, and spun to the right, successfully pulling out of her attacker's grasp. She ducked to avoid being grabbed again and was able to take a few steps away when her attacker didn't put up a fight. She turned and crouched down, ready if they came after her.

"Gosh, Mom," Shawn said, looking at her like she was crazy and rubbing a spot just below his ribs. "That hurt."

Sadie's brain registered that it wasn't Jane standing in front of her. Her relief took center stage for half a beat before she straightened, balled her hands into fists at her side, and glared at her son. "What on earth are you thinking sneaking up on me like that!"

"I was thinking it would be *funny*," Shawn said. He looked down and lifted his shirt, obviously looking for an injury he could use to evoke sympathy. He revealed less stomach than Sadie had ever seen on her massive boy. She'd noticed his weight loss when he'd arrived that morning but hadn't realized how much of a difference it had made to his overall physique. "You have some freaking pointy elbows, Mom. I'm surprised I'm not bleeding."

"I'm not sure I would feel all that bad if you *were* bleeding," Sadie said, still angry. "You scared me half to death."

"Which could have been *funny* if you hadn't gone all ninja on me." Shawn put his shirt down and smoothed the fabric. "What's your deal?"

Sadie turned to the cabinet and got out a bowl instead of answering him right away. In light of the fact that it wasn't Jane who'd broken into her house and attacked her, she felt silly for having thought it in the first place.

Shawn had a history with Jane from when she'd pretended to be interested in him in order to get closer to Sadie. The pseudo relationship was embarrassing for Shawn, and she knew he didn't want to revisit the memories. Shawn had probably sent the texts all along, but her pride kept her from asking for confirmation; she wasn't in the mood to hear him gloat over the fact that he'd totally had her going.

Sadie dished up some rice pudding and handed him the bowl. He'd asked her to save him some for when he got home, and now it seemed a perfect change of subject.

"Can I just have half of that amount?" Shawn asked.

Sadie looked at the brimming bowl, a bit hurt. "You love my rice pudding."

"Too much," he said, patting his flattened belly. "It's way past seven o'clock at night, and that's, like, pure carbs and sugar. After having Evil Chicken for lunch—which was awesome, by the way—and steaks for dinner, I need to draw a hard line."

Sadie scooped half of the pudding back into the pan, only slightly mollified by his explanation. At least she could share the

leftovers with Breanna tomorrow; she loved Sadie's rice pudding, too. "You've never turned down my cooking in your life."

"I'm finally eating the way I know I should. Except if I were really being careful I wouldn't be eating this at all and I wouldn't have asked for Evil Chicken in the first place."

Sadie handed the half-full bowl to her son who took it with a grateful smile. Shawn was part-Polynesian and part-African American, which explained his large build, dark coloring, and tightly curled, medium brown hair. In the past he'd worn his hair in a fluffy, picked-out Afro but had recently cut it rather short. The conservative style made his face look thinner and his jaw stronger. In a word, he looked more like a "man" than he ever had before.

Sadie would never have guessed she'd miss the frothy hair or the long braids of his youth but in a way, she did. Maybe it was harder for her to see him so grown up because of the relationship he'd developed with his birth mother, Lorraina, over the last year or so. Sadie hadn't come to terms with the idea that she and Lorraina were sharing him now. When he was younger, she had been the only parent in his life.

"You're looking really good," Sadie said, as they headed to the table. She gathered her papers into a stack and set it aside so that neither of them accidentally spilled rice pudding on any of her precious lists.

"Thanks," Shawn said before taking his first bite. The way he savored it, holding it in his mouth for a few seconds before chewing and swallowing, made Sadie feel better about him having a smaller portion. "Lorraina's doctors suggested I work on eating better as we prep for the surgery."

"Four weeks from now, right?" Sadie had learned about Lorraina

through a bizarre set of circumstances on an Alaskan cruise several weeks ago. Lorraina had fallen ill on the cruise and had been in a hospital in Anchorage ever since where doctors were monitoring her recovery until she was strong enough for a living liver donation from her only biological child, Shawn, whom she had given up for adoption at birth.

Sadie was proud of him for being willing to donate part of his liver, but she was still a little jealous of the relationship he shared with Lorraina, hurt that he'd kept it from her for such a long time, and worried about her baby boy having major surgery. They were taking part of his liver, for heaven's sake. That wasn't like donating blood where a granola bar and some orange juice was sufficient for recovery.

"The surgery's scheduled for a month from yesterday," Shawn said. "Did I tell you I was able to get out of my lease early?"

"No," Sadie said, though he'd told her he was going to try. The lease was supposed to extend through December. Shawn updated her with the specifics of how he'd negotiated the shortened term and went on to tell her his plans from here on out. After the wedding, he would fly back to Michigan long enough to take the final exam for his last class. He would then pack up his apartment and bring everything to Sadie's house to store it for a little while.

"And then you'll go to Anchorage from here?" Sadie asked when he finished.

"Yeah, I fly out on August seventeenth. The hospital arranged for me to stay in a guest house that won't cost me much. Can you still come up in time for the surgery?"

"Absolutely," Sadie said, so glad that he trusted her to not let her petty feelings get in the way of being a part of this experience. She

was determined to prove herself worthy of his confidence. “And how are things with Maggie?”

Shawn glanced at her over his spoon and his whole face lit up. “Amaaaaazing,” he said in a breathy word that made her smile.

For the next ten minutes, he updated Sadie on the state of his relationship with Miss Maggie Lewish from Sacramento, California. Other than the time they’d spent together on the cruise, the rest of their relationship had taken place online, but it seemed to be getting pretty serious despite them living twenty-five hundred miles apart.

“I applied for some jobs in Sacramento last week,” Shawn said. Sadie put down her spoon with a clink. He smiled sheepishly as he continued, “Actually, I *only* applied for jobs in Sacramento.”

Sadie’s arms broke out in goose bumps. This *was* serious. She opened her mouth to ask about his long-term expectations of this relationship when her phone chimed with a text message. The sound reminded her of the text messages she’d received earlier in the evening. She looked at Shawn, who was scooping another bite of rice pudding from his bowl and, therefore, not sending her a cryptic text from someone’s phone he’d borrowed at the bachelor party earlier. Somehow her brain had built up an entire theory without having asked him a single question about it.

“What?” Shawn asked when he noticed her watching him.

“Um, were you sending me text messages earlier?”

“Earlier like this morning when we were meeting up at the airport and you had the wrong terminal?”

“No, earlier like when you were supposed to be at the bachelor party and then took five years off my life instead.”

“No offense, Mom,” Shawn said, looking back at his bowl as he



scraped a final bite from the edges. “But that was *not* a party. It was a bunch of old guys playing poker without money and talking about fishing lures. Bo-oring.”

Sadie attempted a smile to cover her sinking stomach at the realization that it wasn't Shawn behind the earlier messages. The text reminder chime sounded again, and she looked around for her phone before remembering that she'd dropped it when Shawn had played his practical joke. She searched the kitchen, finally locating the phone underneath the lip of the cabinets next to the stove. Good thing she'd invested in a top-of-the-line protective case. She'd been through enough phones in the last couple of years to know better than to take any chances. Before picking up the phone, she took a deep breath and braced herself.

*Unknown:* I don't like it when you ignore me.

“Mom?”

Sadie's heart rate increased again, and she looked up to see Shawn watching her. His forehead was wrinkled in concern. “You okay? Why did you think I was texting you?”

“I've been getting these weird messages tonight.”

Shawn crossed the room to her. “What do you mean, weird messages?”

Sadie gave him her phone and watched him scroll through the messages. She wanted to say something like, “I'm sure it's not a big deal,” but she couldn't make herself do it.

“Do you think it's Jane?” Shawn asked when he finished. Him jumping to the same conclusion Sadie had without her saying so both validated her concern and increased it that much more. The

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phone chimed again, and Shawn's eyes darted to the screen. He stiffened and Sadie stepped beside him so she could see the latest message.

*Unknown:* Tell Shawn hi for me. It's been a long time.